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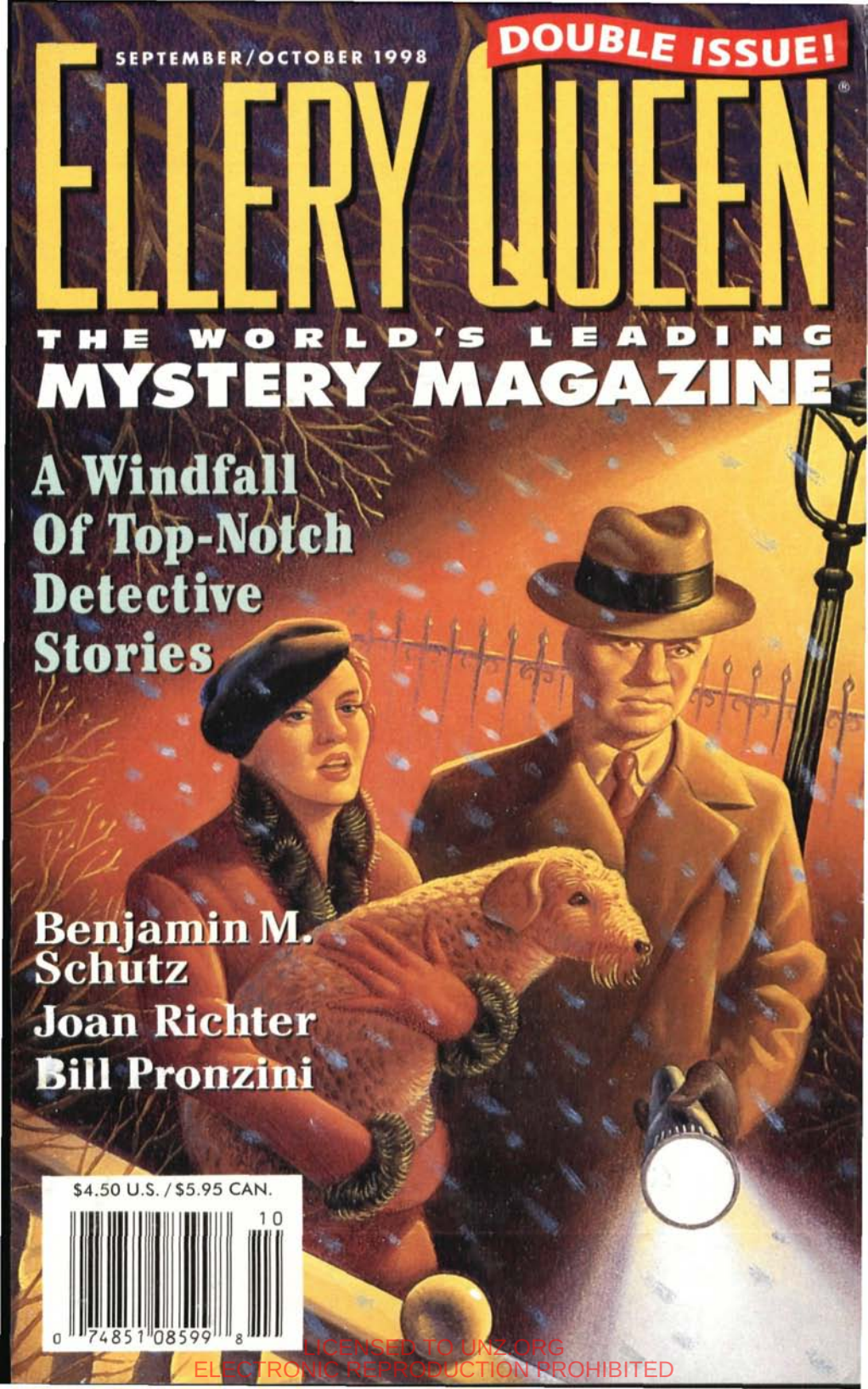

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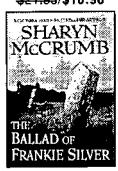

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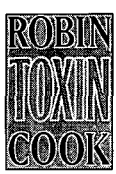

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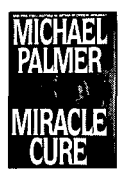

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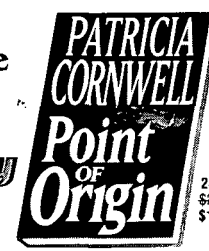

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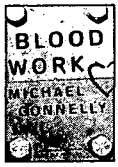

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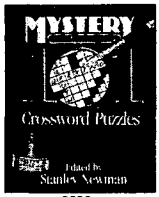

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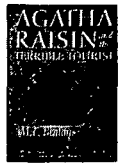

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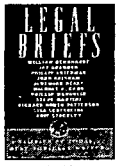

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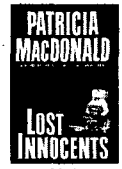

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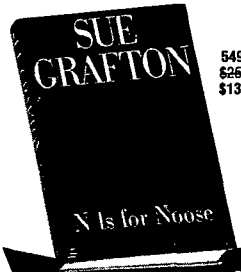

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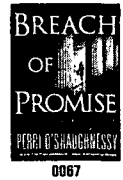

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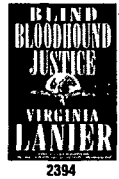

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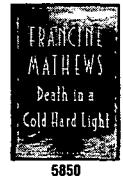

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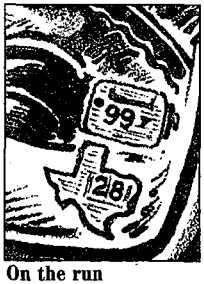

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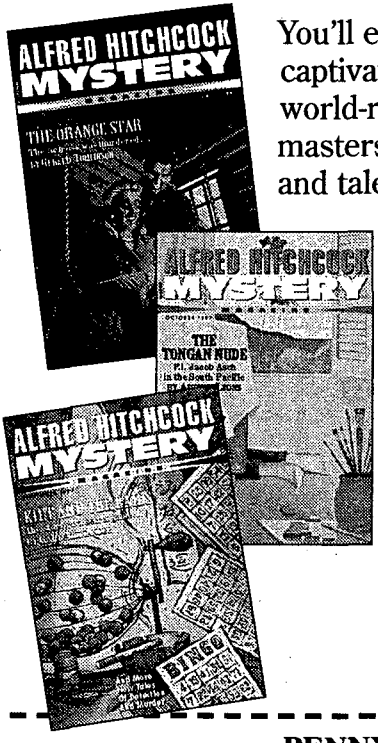

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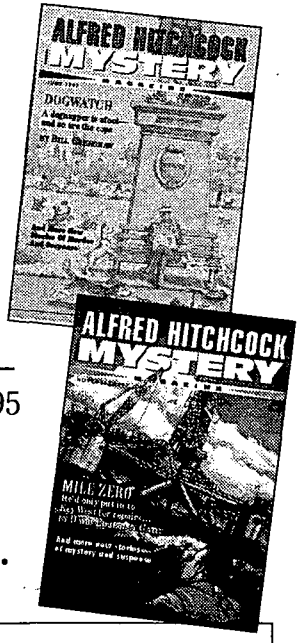

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The Archaeologist's Revenge

by Janice Law

Nothing would have been managed without the road, but fortune favors the prepared, as well as the brave, and I'd been preparing for years. Ever since the afternoon Eva "disappeared," I've lived for two things, work and revenge.

I'm an archaeologist, not a famous one, but I think I can say I'm well respected. Solid and tenured, with the requisite two books under my belt, I've reached a pleasant academic plateau. My specialty is the burial customs in the Late Riverine Archaic, and while the eastern woodland tribes are not really a glamour area in Native American studies, I have found my researches deeply satisfying—and useful, too, as you will see.

Janice Law is the author of nine mystery novels, most involving her series character Anna Peters, one of the earliest of modern women detectives. The first Peters novel received an Edgar Award nomination in 1976—in 1997, reviewing her novel *Cross-check*, *Booklist* said, "Peters remains one of the most fully drawn female leads in crime fiction." This new story is not a series work, but the characters here too are fully drawn. †

"Useful" is, perhaps, the proper word for me. I've been a useful teacher, a useful researcher; Jane, my wife, might say I was a useful husband, but a life of pure utility robs the soul. That was where Eva came in; Eva was social danger, emotional extravagance, pure poetry. I adored her from our first meeting, when I walked into the Feingolds' living room prepared for the usual round of academic gossip and one-upmanship, and saw her sitting by the fireplace. She was fair and plump, a woman bewitching in that peachy mode the old Flemish painters loved so much. When she saw us approaching, she smiled a big, open-mouthed smile and devoured my heart.

"Come meet Eva, Eva and Andrew Donaldson," said Chloe Feingold, who knows everyone's rank, tenure status, dissertation subject, and grant prospects. "Andrew's just gotten the Renaissance appointment in the English department." She beamed with unfeigned delight at a thin,

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focused-looking chap with lank brown hair and wind-burned skin, a poor specimen next to his blooming wife. "And," Chloe added, as if announcing a special treat for us, "he's a Renaissance man himself, running a marathon next week."

Fool, I thought, as I shook his hand, what are marathons, what is the Renaissance, that you should neglect this treasure? But he did neglect Eva, though they were just moving in, though the old Burdine farmhouse was a wreck, though the lawn was too long for their little suburban mower. Fortune, as I said, favors the prepared. I brought over our riding mower—my wife, Jane, insisted—and while I circled the yard, leaving swaths of hay on the lawn, Eva raked up the cuttings and smiled as I went past. I was as happy that afternoon as if I had been orbiting the outskirts of paradise.

Five years. If you know the nosey, gossipy ways of academe, you won't believe me, but Eva and I had five good years. I even came to love the marathon, particularly the requisite training runs, which provided us with hours of happiness. I remember those afternoons in the pasture back of the old farm: summer heat, wild berries, the Glassian repetition of locusts and cicadas, my darling's faintly downy cheeks, the dimples on her knees, a certain blessed avidity. Then fall, the smell of wild grapes and leaf mulch; and spring, spring! after the logistical difficulties of the winter, spring with woodcocks mating, thrushes singing, skunk cabbage and marsh marigolds bursting from the swamp. Each spring, I understood why captives of the old Iroquois and Algonquins were reluctant to return to the stiff Colonial world of floors and chairs, of stays and ruffs and high leather boots.

I would push off in my canoe, paddle along the rim of the large pond, thread my way through the marsh on the little streamlets I came to know so well, and land at the foot of the old Burdine, now the Donaldsons', pasture. Simplicity itself, when you think about it. I always had excuses: prospecting for fish weirs, looking for campsites, immersing myself in the habitat of the archaic woodsmen. Believe me, I understood them much better after I went hunting for joy in my own canoe, stealing along the pale of settlement to pounce on my own fair darling Eva.

If my wife Jane knew, she was indifferent; wisely so, I think. We had two children, both in college at the time, and our marriage, if no longer inspiring, has its own fidelities and foundations. We understand each other; that's an important point, and Jane has her own interests, the writing of romance novels chief among them. I'm told that her last three are quite the best she's ever done. I've wondered if suspicions of my affair inspired her, but Jane keeps her own counsel.

Andrew was a different sort, possessive but neglectful, the very worst matrimonial combination, and he cast the tolerant, sophisticated spirit of my wife in a very handsome light. Andrew didn't deserve Eva. While he thought his wife was faithful, he ignored her; as soon as he suspected she had a lover, he transferred some of his compulsions from dis-

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tance running and obscure textualities to interfering with the happiness of others.

I'd have enjoyed having it out with him; physical violence, scandal, statements libelous and actionable sometimes have a deep visceral appeal. But, besides the fact that I had fifteen years on him—fifteen years at least!—there was my family to think about, and, as a very ancient anthropologist once said, the price of a good, or at least a tolerable wife is beyond rubies. So Eva and I were careful. It is my nature to be cautious, to prepare my ground—you'll see proof of that—but Eva revealed a sly discretion that, considering her spontaneous and uninhibited appetites, was as surprising as it was delightful. For a couple of years, Andrew quite unfairly suspected Gerry DeSentis, a rising young theorist in the English department, and contrived, I'm told, to keep him from tenure.

In certain moods it almost annoys me that I was never a suspect. "Old Bones and Feathers," with his gimpy knee and gray hair, wasn't thought to be up to such pranks, but maybe that was just the chauvinism of literary people. I did worry a little when *The Last of the Mohicans* became such a hit; that amazing poster of Daniel Day Lewis rushing bare-chested through the forest—didn't that hint at the delights of a wilder, more mysterious, now vanished life? And who should know about such things if not I, with my head full of rituals and artifacts, of customs and myths, gliding toward my beloved over the black water of the swamp?

Oh yes, we were happy, very, very happy, until one fatal afternoon in mid April. We'd had a long, wet winter, one of those inconclusive and unsatisfactory seasons too mild for skiing, too wet for walks. Her children were quite small then, and arrangements were difficult. Her husband's graduate students, if good babysitters, were eagle-eyed and loose-tongued, so Eva and I fell back on the Westbrook Mall, where the huge parking lots and food courts allow an anonymous rendezvous. We planned to meet that day in the south lot and take my van for a quick run to the state forest, a mixed deciduous woodland almost deserted in the dreary weather. We would have returned to the mall later, to meet, as if by chance, in the food court, where we could talk back and forth between the little tables like casual acquaintances.

This was a scenario we'd used before with complete success, for neither of us liked to lie. "Where did you go today?" Jane might ask. "I bought some socks at Penney's," I'd say honestly, or, "Stopped by the bookstore in the mall. Not a damn thing there but bestsellers and weight-loss books." And if she mentioned that Chloe Feingold or Pat Meyer had seen me at the mall, I'd say, "Half the university was out today; I ran into Eva Donaldson in the food court."

When Eva did not show up that afternoon, I was disappointed but not worried. She had, on occasion, to cancel at the last moment: the failure of a sitter, the illness of a child, the odd sprain or strain that brought Andrew home prematurely from his interminable training. If anything,

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this occasional disappointment and uncertainty added a piquant note to our relationship. I'm a great believer in regularity in marriage, but in affairs of the heart a certain suspense, a certain irregularity in what is, after all, an irregularity itself, opens the way for serendipity.

I hung around the magazine racks for a while, then went home with a handful of novels for Jane. I had supper, read two chapters of the dissertation I was supervising, and went to bed. I had no idea that my life had been drastically altered until the next evening when Gus Phillips called with the news that Eva Donaldson, my Eva!, was missing. I only understood snatches of what he was saying, "car abandoned at the mall," "sitter worried," "Andrew frantic," "police."

"Police," I said, uncomprehending. It's odd how, at certain moments, you're unable to fit together the pieces of the universe.

"Of course, he called the police," said Gus, the half-horrified, half-delighted bearer of news. "She's been gone over twenty-four hours. Everyone's alarmed."

Only when I got the whole story again from Chloe Feingold, whose narration had an amplitude missing from Gus's account, did I start to believe that Eva's old Volvo had been found abandoned in the north mall parking lot. "Next to Filene's," said Chloe. "They're having their big white sale at the moment."

I believe she told me some details of the sale, but I had only one idea in mind: that Eva had been harmed. "At the mall," I said. "The north lot."

Chloe confirmed this, and with every word my heart sank. We never parked in the north lot, because it was near the academic's consumer triangle of Computer City, the whole-foods shop, and the bookstore. We favored the south lot near Home Depot and Sears.

After I had hung up the phone and poured a gin and tonic with very little tonic, I thought about what I'd just been told. I was sure that Eva would not have parked her car in the north lot, and, with a heavy sense of fatality, I wondered if she had driven her car there at all. The mall was barely five miles from her house. Five miles. What's five miles for a marathon runner? And just as if I were an old shaman dancing before the fire in the long house with my drum and rattles and wolf jaw, I saw Andrew getting out of the Volvo and locking it and slipping down the row of cars; out to the highway verge, over the fence to the bike path, then galloping for home with his elbows flying and his skinny, muscular legs pounding out the yardage. Five miles was nothing: I was sure he'd done it.

And where was Eva? The next afternoon I got in my canoe, not really believing in her disappearance. I thought I could glide across the pond, slip up the little branch of the river, and see her waving to me from the pasture. Instead, the field was empty, and I saw something else that had not registered before, the new meadow along the dirt road.

Eva had told me about their plans. A narrow, bumpy track ran beside their yard from the state road back into the Websters' property, which

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includes part of the swamp and a good spread of grazing land between the Donaldsons' property and ours. The plan was to have the strip of scrub, weeds, and hay along this old road plowed up and re-seeded with wildflowers. "Easier than a regular flower garden," Eva had said, "and wonderful for butterflies."

Kneeling in my canoe, I could hear her saying, "wonderful for butterflies," and, with that memory of her sunny, open face, of her delight, I burst into tears. I knew she was dead. The place of our happiness was suddenly unbearable, and I was about to paddle away into the swamp when I looked at the bare plot of earth. It had been harrowed since I visited last, harrowed and, no doubt, seeded with the daisies and coreopsis, goldenrods and black-eyed Susans, wild geranium, Indian Paintbrush, blue-eyed grass, and clovers that have been blooming so successfully these last few years. I looked at the newly harrowed field, and I'd have bet my life that my darling Eva was lying hidden under those neat rows.

There followed the most excruciating period of my life. I was caught by the discretion which had deprived Andrew of any obvious motive. Oh, the police looked at him all right; it tells you something about marriage that the husband is always a prime suspect, but he seemed grief-stricken and, more important, he had an alibi: that same damn field. Old Webster, who's been senile as long as I've known him, swore up and down that Andrew was working on the wildflower meadow the whole afternoon. He heard the tractor. The whole afternoon.

That left the morning. The children were in nursery school in the morning, but they had a sitter for the afternoon because Eva was going to the mall and Andrew planned to do the meadow. He claimed she left just before the sitter arrived, but there was no proof of that. He could have killed Eva, buried her, driven the Volvo to the mall, run back, hopped on his tractor, and harrowed the plowed field and the new grave into oblivion. That's what I thought he'd done; I was sure of it.

I think the police may have had thoughts along those lines, too.

Andrew was at the state police station three, four, five times. But nothing came of it. There was no evidence, no motive. By the time they searched the house there wasn't a clue. He'd had a couple more floors refinished by then—they'd been doing the rooms a few at a time to spare the children the fumes, and the little wildflower meadow was a foot tall and growing lush. Chloe Feingold told me that Andrew showed the troopers around with tears in his eyes. When nothing turned up, he posted a $10,000 reward for information about his wife's disappearance, which suggested that his last book, a reader for undergraduates, was doing better than any of us had expected.

Still, he was a suspect, really the only one. The problem was that the police couldn't give him a motive. I was the only person who could provide that—unless Jane had seen more than I'd thought—and I was in a bind. To get at Andrew, I'd have to ruin my marriage and my comfort-

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able relationships with our children—and Eva would still be gone forever.

Perhaps you'll decide I wasn't worthy of Eva either, and that cowardice kept me silent. Cowardice and convenience. Perhaps I did have a time of cowardice and confusion, but this is to record the fact that ultimately I stirred myself to be worthy of my love and seek revenge.

Just how I was to achieve that satisfaction was not so easily determined. I can't tell you how many spring and summer days I paddled over to the edge of the pasture and tortured myself with memories. I stared at the meadow, flourishing undisturbed, but its soft green and yellow tints gave me no inspiration, no solutions.

I watched Andrew, too. I studied him in the faculty senate, followed his moves at parties, lurked in the swamp while he was mowing the pastures. I took to calling him up, standing nervous at pay phones in the mall, listening to the ring, ring down the line. Sometimes I thought his voice sounded anxious and sometimes tired. Once or twice, late at night, he got angry. I listened without saying anything, waiting, always waiting for the admission, the confession—as if, after all his cares and plans, he was likely to blurt out the truth to a mysterious and silent caller. You will appreciate that I was not myself then.

I actually stooped to a poison-pen letter. I'm not proud of that. My only excuse was my desperation: I felt I had to frighten Andrew out of his complacency. I was at the computer lab one night, the big one, not the little departmental lab, and before I knew what I was doing, I'd typed, "You killed her," and printed it out.

I put the message in an envelope and mailed it, then spent the next few days half sick with hope and anxiety. Nothing happened, except that Chloe Feingold told me Andrew was taking everything very hard and invited Jane and me around to have dinner with him. As a result of that excruciating evening, I began to think about my own specialty and how my knowledge might be put to use.

My first attempts were abortive. I made an intensive study of eastern woodland bows and learned to shoot one. I spent some enlightening afternoons with an elderly member of the Narragansetts, and I got so that I could flake a point pretty well. I did not get to where I could see myself skewering Andrew with a brilliant shot to the heart.

I considered Native American botanicals next and worked more hours than I care to remember in the pharmacy lab and in the crumbling shed where Mrs. Margaret Laughing Bear stores dried plants and her musty-smelling packets of traditional medicines. I published a couple of papers that were well received, but Mrs. Laughing Bear was dexterous in fending off all inquiries about poisons. Besides, as I began to get ahold of myself, I could see the difficulties of slipping tincture of nightshade into Andrew's cocktail or of feeding him a Death Angel mushroom.

I do think that these fantasies, and others even more embarrassing and puerile, kept me sane. They gave me hope; they kept me from doing

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something obvious, unforgivable, irretrievable. And then came the road and, all of a sudden, everything fell into place. All my futile efforts, my midnight walks, my sad canoe trips, even those cruel phone calls, had been so much priming of the pump. When the road came, I recognized my chance. All that remained was to proceed in a timely and orderly fashion.

What had happened was that Eli Webster, the senile fool who had given Andrew his alibi in the first place, finally went into a home. The grandchildren wasted no time subdividing the old farm and contracting with a particularly fast and profit-hungry developer to transform sixty prime acres into something to be called Webster Estates, with a projected forty houses. Few of us in town were pleased about that and a good old-fashioned zoning and development fight ensued.

I pitched in to testify about the archaeological value of the fish weirs and the campsite on the property, and I helped Sue LeBonte assemble some of the environmental data on the impact such a big project would have on the watershed. The neighbors were pretty much all against the development, but I found it significant that Andrew didn't get really involved until the business of the road came up.

Access for the new Webster Estates was going to have to be that dirt road along the Donaldsons' little wildflower meadow. Nothing could be done, no construction, certainly no heavy truck traffic, until that lane was widened and upgraded. At this point, Andrew went ballistic. I felt I had him for sure.

Like so many other things in small towns, the Webster Estates finally came to a compromise: bigger lots, fewer houses, an environmental tract set aside. We were to have ten houses, which was more than enough, and over Andrew Donaldson's strenuous objections, the town agreed to widening and paving the road. I was at the council meeting the night the agreement passed, and I went right from there to the university. My book bag was in the car. I took out my texts and my grade book, locked them in the trunk, and went into the building with my empty knapsack.

This was not unusual behavior. I'm nocturnal by choice; I often work late and I make midnight rambles to the museum for books or records or to check some item in the archives. I remember stopping that night at the museum and looking in at my favorite exhibit: the bark house my students built several years ago as part of our Eastern Woodlands display. In the light from the hall, the support pillars cast long treelike shadows over the little bark house, a miniature of the noble halls of the Iroquois.

I had an impulse to go inside, and I did, crouching for a few moments in the cramped space that smells of cedar and bark, mingled with the institutional odors of floor polish and air conditioning. I knew from Mrs. Laughing Bear's shed that it should also smell like dried plants and dirt floors and the residue of fires and cooking fat. I'm not sure what I'd have told the custodian if he'd come by. Certainly not the truth, which

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was that I was paying homage to people who understood blood vengeance and who were about to help me get it.

After a few moments in the half-darkness, I crawled out and relocked the door before descending to Archives and Research, a pleasantly old-fashioned room. Below the horizontal windows set high in the walls are banks of good mahogany cabinets where we store our specimens. Most of the collection is pottery shards, but we also have a lot of arrow and spear points, some clothing, a couple of pieces of first-rate embroidery and beadwork, and some bones.

In the last couple of years, we've returned a number of complete skeletons to the Mohican and Pequot tribal authorities, and we're negotiating with the Pequots over some other artifacts. They're building a collection, and I've been trying to interest them in some scholarly activities. I see an endowed chair eventually, perhaps other ventures; with their casino revenue, they've certainly got the money.

By rights, some of the skulls in case #14 should be returned as well. They came from federal land and fall under NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act), but that's a future project. My own favorite, #2456, is from my personal collection and belonged to a woman of the Adena, the mound-building people of the central Ohio Valley. I've had her carbon dated. She lived around 1000 B.C., and I've had her skull ever since I stole it from the excavation I was working on the year I received my doctorate.

There's a certain symmetry, isn't there, to my only two cases of professional malfeasance? Beauty must be my excuse: #2456 was a lovely skull, darkened to an elegant biscuit color by the soil where it had lain for so many centuries. As I examined it that night in the strong halogen lamp over the case, I saw that her head would have been round, her face broad, perhaps plump like Eva's. I hoped her short life had been happy, as I believe Eva's was. The eye sockets were large; #2456's eyes would probably have been black or very dark brown, instead of Eva's gray-blue, and her hair would have been dark. I think that she was a pretty woman.

Fortuitously, I had put a paper label on her skull instead of numbering the surface of the bone, and, after making sure that there were no extraneous marks, I peeled the tag off and cleaned the little sticky patch that remained with alcohol. Then I wrapped #2456 in a piece of old newspaper and put it in my knapsack.

I had only to wait until the road crew arrived, a matter of considerable vigilance. I went the long way to the university every day in order to be sure the town hadn't yet begun work, and every afternoon in decent weather, I was in the swamp, listening for the sound of graders and bulldozers—or for the softer, fainter sound of a man digging through tough meadow grass.

At last the contract went out, and one May morning just as we were finishing exams, I found the road crew had arrived. That evening, as

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late as I dared make it, I told Jane I was going to take a paddle around the swamp.

"Perhaps I'll go with you one night," she said. "It's been lovely weather."

I had the horrible feeling that she was going to suggest coming with me right then. "Mosquitoes," I said, ashamed of the reluctance in my voice and aware that I was neglecting Jane. "Let me buy some more spray. I'll get that tomorrow. And a paddle. You'll want a paddle, too."

"It's not worth the fuss," said Jane.

"Tomorrow," I said, kissing her cheek. "And I'll do all the paddling."

She laughed and, now reprieved, I made a joke of near disaster. I transferred my knapsack from the car to the canoe and put on my moccasins for luck. I'd been extraordinarily tempted by a pair of embroidered moosehide slippers that night in the museum archives and had needed all my will power and professional pride to leave them in their protective packet.

By the time I got to the Donaldsons', the light was fading. I tied the canoe to some scrub and walked quietly toward the meadow with my knapsack slung over my shoulder. I can't describe to you my state of alertness that night. I seemed to hear every insect, every bird, the breaking of every twig, the bending of every blade of grass. Up at the top of the hill, the Donaldsons' house was lit up against the lacy darkness of the partially leafed-out trees and the radiant pink and lavender sky. It's really a very nice location, but after Eva's death, Andrew had not kept the place up as well. The gaps between the trees along the road were gradually being filled in with a hedge of saplings, shrubs, and vines. I was screened by this growth as I approached the work site where the lane was scraped down a good foot or more and piles of earth were heaped along the sides. They had roughly doubled the track, ripping out some of the young trees and cutting several feet into the meadow. I had just about reached this open area when I heard footsteps.

I practically fell into the only shelter available, a little cluster of maple saplings, poison ivy, and bittersweet. A man was walking along the meadow on the other side of the scrub and I was sure it was Andrew. I lowered myself into the vines and grass and waited. He seemed to be checking the work that had been done, tapping the ground here and there with a shovel, but I didn't dare raise my head for confirmation.

What if he saw me? What to say? Perhaps I should have been tempted by the museum's polished Algonquin war club instead of those moccasins, but actual physical violence, however satisfactory in the abstract, was out of my plan, perhaps beyond my capacity. Instead, I crouched silently for interminable, mosquito-filled minutes until his footsteps faded.

Once he was gone, I moved quickly in the semidarkness. Weeks before, I had picked out a cluster of large trees. As I approached them, I selected the most substantial heap of bulldozed earth on the meadow side. Taking #2456 from my knapsack, I packed the cranium with soil,

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then gently fitted it into the raw earth. This delicate operation was probably hampered as much as helped by my professional expertise. It was ten minutes by my watch before I felt it looked right, the skull noticeable but half buried in the sand, clay, and rocks, and another five before I had erased the softly rounded prints of my moccasins.

When I got home, I offered to run to the convenience store for some of Jane's favorite ice cream. The pint of pistachio was cold against my arm as I dialed Andrew's number and listened to it ring. "Who is it?" he cried. For the first time, I responded. I laughed out loud and set down the receiver.

The discovery was in the local paper the next night. I'd half expected to be called at work. It wouldn't have been the first time, for with the density of artifacts in our area, I've run programs for construction companies on the importance of reporting bones and relics. In turn, we try not to hold up work too long while we recover artifacts and map the site. However, the grader operator was a crime buff, not an archaeology buff. She saw the skull, remembered the Donaldson investigation, and called the police.

"It's just a tragedy," Chloe Feingold told me that evening. For once, I was hanging on her every word. "Of course, poor Andrew is nearly hysterical." For some reason, he was always one of her favorites.

"Surely they don't think he had anything to do with it!" I said.

"Well, of course not!" Chloe said. "But he hasn't helped himself. He keeps saying, 'It can't be Eva,' 'It isn't Eva,' putting the idea in their heads, you know. But you can't imagine his state of mind!"

Actually, I could.

"We've recommended our lawyer. You know Hugh Boyd, don't you? He wants that skull examined right away."

"Surely the coroner . . ." I began.

"Hugh says it looks old, and I'm just sure it is. Why Andrew had to mention Eva at all is totally beyond me," Chloe said.

"She must always be in his mind," I said.

"Of course," Chloe said impatiently, "but it can't be Eva, it just can't be, and the sooner they get you to date the remains, the better. It's important that we all rally behind Andrew."

The dean said something similar to me when he learned that I'd been asked to examine the skull. That was after the police had dug around the road without success; after Andrew, behaving badly, had retreated into shock and mental anguish, and after Hugh Boyd had told all and sundry that his client was being subjected to duress. Though I let Andrew stew as long as possible, I eventually had to give my opinion.

We assembled in a small conference room in the county jail, Hugh Boyd, Andrew, me, and the investigating officers. As the seating worked out, Andrew and I were across from each other at the institutional gray metal conference table, an optimal arrangement. This was the sort of single combat I'd envisioned, and I was pleased to see that Andrew had lost his tanned aura of fitness. He looked like the gaunt

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acolyte of some obscure and fanatical religion, and though he greeted me warmly, I sensed that his nerve was failing. Mine, as you'll see, was in perfect condition.

I laid the carefully repackaged skull on the table and opened my briefcase for my notes. I moved very slowly and deliberately; I had waited in secret for this moment for nearly three years. I think the secrecy is worth emphasizing, for how much of achievement is anticipation, and how much of anticipation is the pleasure of sharing our hopes with others?

Andrew winced at the sight of the skull, and I felt myself smile involuntarily before I cleared my throat and began reading. In essence, I said that the skull was very old and its presence, somewhat anomalous. I speculated briefly about trade routes and the diffusion of Archaic civilization. My lectures are considered first-rate and my introductory classes are always filled early.

"The key thing," said Hugh Boyd, ignoring Eva's disappearance, Andrew's guilt, and my revenge, "is that, as we've maintained all along, the bones could not possibly be those of Eva Donaldson. That being the case, there is absolutely no reason to continue questioning my client."

When the investigating officer had reservations about this, I raised my professional concerns: the possibility of more bones, even artifacts. I suggested a modest excavation trench. "If we concentrate on the meadow, we won't need to hold up the road work at all," I said.

"No," said Andrew, very loudly and angrily.

I feigned the greatest surprise. "Surely, it would be the best possible thing for you, as well as for certain lucky selected graduate students."

"No," Andrew said. "I won't have the meadow disturbed any further. It was Eva's meadow; she wanted it in flowers." For a moment, I thought he might attempt tears. "I don't know why you even raised the subject. All you were asked to do was to estimate the age of the—" he flapped his hand toward the packet "—the remains."

Hugh Boyd made soothing noises, but the lieutenant was clearly interested.

"Of course," I said, "my apologies for even suggesting it, but I'm sure Eva would have wanted this cleared up."

"How do you know what Eva would have wanted?" Andrew demanded. I think right then that he began belatedly to suspect me.

"I know the dean is concerned," I continued, "and with your tenure reviews coming up . . ." I left this phrase dangling. "Suspicion," I added, "suspicion can have such a negative effect. You can hardly imagine," I told Boyd and the lieutenant.

"I think everyone will understand my situation has been perfectly terrible," Andrew said. I'm sure I was not the only one to notice that with the notion of tenure, his emotions were suddenly completely convincing.

"The committee, the dean, everyone . . ."

I laughed, a miscalculation, but I couldn't help it. There's a kind of willful naivete I find irresistibly comic.

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Andrew started as if he'd been struck. "This whole business was your doing!" he cried. He actually stood up at the table. He was right, of course, but I can't say I rate him highly in quickness of perception.

"Control yourself, Andrew. I don't know what you're talking about."

The words poured out. "That skull," "your laugh," "Eva!" But I'll spare you the full and unabridged text. I remained calm, courteous; I really was extraordinarily calm and courteous that day. I ignored the personal aspersions and said, "There's no reason for you to panic about the meadow, Andrew. For the price of a few aerial photographs we can set everyone's mind at rest. I just thought the process of trial and error would be good for the students."

Hugh Boyd began sputtering, but the lieutenant—I think that was his rank, trooper ranks are different from city police, you know—asked, "Aerial photography?"

"You hadn't thought of that? Archaeological trade secret, I guess." I was well into my explanation of how ruins, foundation trenches, and graves can be spotted from the air, when Andrew lunged across the table and—there's no other appropriate word here—attacked me.

I still haven't decided whether that was deliberate or not, I mean, a deliberate ploy to suggest unsoundness of mind or just a total failure of self-control. In any case, Andrew Donaldson was held for psychiatric assessment, and three days later I had the painful satisfaction of pointing out a small oblong, visible in a properly enhanced aerial photograph of the meadow. When excavated, this telltale depression proved to contain my Eva's body.

After the trial, I asked for custody of the old skull, although this was a somewhat delicate matter, the state troopers having some suspicions about the source of the original find. Then one of my graduate students became intrigued with the resemblances to known Adena skulls; she wanted to examine both the site and the skull more thoroughly. It was with difficulty that I dissuaded her; in professional conscience, I could not let her build her thesis on a hoax. Finally, as expected, the Pequots got involved. I had some delicate negotiations with their heavyweight lawyer before they settled for three other bona fide eastern-woodlands relics from the historic period.

When interest dies down, I will quietly relabel #2456 and return her to my collection. Or perhaps I will take her home and rebury her somewhere in the Ohio valley. Perhaps I will do that; I think I will.

Her people believed in an afterlife and provisioned themselves well for it, tempting grave robbers and that better class of thief, the archaeologist. But after the great favor she's done me, I don't feel I can leave #2456 to dream away her eternity in my mahogany cabinet. She can even have some grave goods; I have extra specimens that will never be missed. And even if they were, I feel a sense of obligation, for I understand now that even the bones of one's beloved are sacred. I understand that every time I slip into the old cemetery to lay some of Eva's wildflowers on her grave. ●

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A Puzzle in Poesy

(Who pets the Beagle? Who sips the Beaujolais?)

by Mort W. Elkind

In the sector of Heaven where crime writers dwell,
Five scribes, side by side, sit typing like Hell
On desks, different colored . . . petting dogs different kinds
Nibbling different type cheese . . . sipping different type wines.

At blue desk sits CHRISTIE. HAMMETT nibbles sweet **Bries.**
DOYLE pets the BLOODHOUND. On buff desk **Bel Paese.**

ELLIN sips pallid *Barsac.* **Bruxelles** goes with *Bordeaux.*
POE works at the first desk, his verbiage aglow.

The first desk sits next to the burgundy one.
The writer with **Beaufort** pets the BULLDOG anon.

Bardalino, on middle desk, a wine of renown;
Barbaresco, on black desk, to your right of the brown.

Bel Paese as a cheese is truly an asset
To the scribe at the desk just left of the BASSET.

Where **Bleu Cheese** is eaten, this gent does not fear,
One desk from the BOXER who's therefore quite near.

Here is your mission, should you choose to abet:
To whom would you go for a BEAGLE to pet?
And if you desired to sip *Beaujolais*,
Who else would you visit in Heaven this day?

NOTE TO READER: Poets are set in CAPS, dogs in SMALL CAPS, wines in *italics*, cheeses in **Bold face**, and colors are underscored. Solution on page 175.

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Art by Allen Davis

NOT ENOUGH MONKEYS

by Benjamin M. Schutz

"Dr. Triplett, Dr. Ransom Triplett?"

I looked up from my exam-covered desk. A young woman hugging a fat file stood in the doorway. I guess just looking up was enough for her, because she entered arm outstretched, hand aimed at the middle of my chest, and said, "I'm Monica Chao, I have a project I'd like to interest you in."

I rose from my chair, intercepted her hand mid-desk, and nodded to the empty chair on her right.

"I've just come from the state penitentiary. I've been talking with some of the staff there and we believe that a terrible miscarriage of justice is going to happen." She hoisted the file onto the desk, where it landed with a thud and lay still as a corpse.

"Actually, the miscarriage is ongoing. Dr. Triplett, they have an innocent man on death row there. He is going to be executed the first of next month."

"And?" I asked.

"And I want you, no, I hope you'll be willing to help me prove this. They're going to execute an innocent man."

"Excuse me, Miss Chao, how old are you?"

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"I beg your pardon." She stiffened in her seat.

"What are you, twenty-four, twenty-five—twenty-six at the most? Am I correct?"

"I fail to see the relevance of my age."

"Humor me. Am I correct?"

She thought about it for a minute. "Close enough. Let's just leave it at that."

"First time to the penitentiary, yes?"

She nodded.

"And lo and behold, you found an innocent man there. Ms. Chao, the prisons are full of innocent men; in fact, they are filled with nothing but innocent men. I have been practicing forensic psychology for almost twenty years; I have yet to meet a man in prison who did the crime. One million innocent men behind bars. Amazing. No wonder crime is on the rise. All the villains are still on the streets. Please, Ms. Chao, no innocent-men stories. I don't know what brought you to the prison, but the innocent-man story gets the inmate an hour, maybe two, alone with a lawyer. An attractive woman like yourself, they probably had a raffle to see who'd get to look up your skirt."

She slid one hand down from her lap to smooth her hem across her thigh. Satisfied that I was merely rude, she was about to fire a response.

I put up my hands in surrender. "Please, Ms. Chao. I get calls or visits like this all the time. If you want to interest me in a project, bring me something truly rare, a culpable convict, a man who says he did it, or better yet, the rarest of all—a remorseful man, a man tortured by guilt over the horrors he inflicted on other people. For that you have my undivided time and attention."

I looked down at the exam I had been grading. Her chair didn't move.

"I don't know what else you have going on in your life, Dr. Triplett, that could be more important than saving an innocent man's life, but I'm not going to let you run me off with your cynicism." She pushed the file toward me. "Don't read it. It's on your head. If they execute an innocent man how will you explain that you didn't have time even to look at the file?" Her jaw was determined but her eyes glistened with oncoming defeat.

"I'm going to do everything I can for my client. He is not going to die because I didn't turn over every rock or look into every corner."

"And what rock am I under, Ms. Chao? Who sent you to me?"

"Mr. Talaverde did."

"Paul Talaverde? My old friend?" I smiled at the memory.

Author of the Leo Haggerty private-eye series, which has brought him both the Edgar Allan Poe and Shamus awards, Benjamin M. Schutz is, by day, a clinical and forensic psychologist. In his new crime story, he gives us a look at his tantalizing and creative profession—a career that appears to inspire much of his fiction-writing.

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"Yes. I work in the pro bono section of the firm."

"What did he say?"

"I'd really rather Mr. Talaverde talk to you. It was his idea."

"No, no, no. You're going to do whatever it takes for your client, remember? This is what it takes; if you want me to read this file you tell me what Paul Talaverde said."

She smiled at me. "And if I do, you'll agree to read the file?"

I shook my head sadly. "No, you have no leverage here. I'm mildly curious, you're desperate." I pushed the file back at her.

"Okay, you asked for it. He said you used to be the best forensic psychologist around, but that you were burned out now. Actually, he said you pretended to be burned out, but that you could still be seduced if the case was interesting enough. He said that if that didn't work, I should try to shame you into it. You had always been vulnerable to that, and probably still were."

"Anything else?"

She looked away and pursed her mouth in distaste. "He said I should start with you because your contract at the university forbids you from doing private-practice work for a fee. So, if you took the case . . ."

"The price was right. Paul say anything else?"

"No, that was it."

"Then we're still friends. Tell him he was right on two counts. Now, I have a couple of questions for you, Ms. Chao."

She brushed an eave of lustrous black hair out of her face and clasped her hands around her knee, a perfect impression of the earnest student eager to please.

"Who did you talk to at the prison? You said 'we' believe there is a terrible miscarriage? Truth or seduction, Ms. Chao?"

"Truth, Dr. Triplett. Our firm got a call from Otis Weems, he was original counsel on this case, saying that one of the doctors at the prison had called him very concerned about Earl, that's Earl Munsey, the defendant." She pointed to the case file.

"Mr. Weems didn't want to get into it, you know the ineffective-counsel issues, so it was assigned to me. I went up to the prison to talk to the doctor. Then I talked to Earl Munsey. Obviously you think I'm a naive fool, but I'm convinced that Earl Munsey didn't do it and they are going to execute an innocent man."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He said Earl was deteriorating as the execution date approached."

"Deteriorating how?"

"You name it. He paced his cell at all hours. He wouldn't leave for exercise. He was convinced that they would move up the date and take him right off the yard. He stopped eating. Then last week he started crying all the time, calling for his mother. He started banging his head against the walls of his cell, he tore off his fingernails digging at the brick."

"You've never been on death row, have you?"

"No. Don't ever want to, either."

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"It's ugly, very ugly. It's cases like this that make people question what we're doing. We destroy another human being's sense of dignity, reduce them to a gibbering gobbet of fear. Why? Then you remember what they did to some other human being and it gets real complicated. At least it does for me."

"Are you in favor of the death penalty?"

"I think in some cases it's just. There are some people who do things for which they should forfeit their lives. But then I don't believe in the sanctity of life. Suicide makes sense to me, so does abortion. What I think is neither here nor there. What you are describing happens all the time. The law prohibits the execution of a mentally ill person. But then, who wouldn't be mentally ill at the prospect of death by electrocution? The prison hospitals routinely medicate prisoners to near-comas as their dates approach so they won't act in such a way as to appear mentally ill and avoid execution. It's a hell of a choice for the doctors. Do nothing and watch your patients shit themselves like crazed rats and then get executed anyway, or trank them to the eyeballs so they're easier to kill. So far you haven't told me anything unusual to warrant looking into this case. It's interesting that the doctor called his attorney, most of the time they wouldn't bother. What's got you so convinced this guy is innocent, not just terrified?"

"When I got there to see him he was curled up on the floor, rocking back and forth, crying for his mother, saying, 'I didn't do it, I didn't do it,' over and over again. I just watched him through the window of his cell. When I went in he didn't even know I was in the room. Nothing changed. I told him who I was. Nothing. No new evidence, no claims that someone else did it or he was framed. He didn't ask me to represent him. Just rocking and crying."

"Did he know you were coming?"

"No. It was on the spur of the moment. The prison doctor had called his attorney, who called us. Mr. Talaverde asked me to go up right away. I didn't tell the doctor I was coming, neither did Mr. Talaverde. We didn't even agree to look into it, so his attomey couldn't have told him anything. I checked with the doctor. Weems hadn't gotten back to him."

"All right. Leave me the file. I'll read it tonight and call you tomorrow." She was right, I didn't have anything more important to do.

"Here's my home number," she said as she wrote on the back of a business card. "My son's been sick. I may not be in the office tomorrow." She slid the card over to me. I put it in the file.

I finished my workout, showered, changed, made a pitcher of gin and tonic, and set it on the patio table next to the file. I put a fresh, clean legal pad and pen on the other side. I poured a drink, sat down, and opened the Earl Munsey file.

Earl Munsey had been nineteen when he was arrested for the murders of Joleen Pennybacker, Martha Dombrowski, and Eleanor Gelman. Pennybacker was found in a model home by a real-estate agent,

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Dombrowski in an empty house by the residents when they returned from a trip, and Gelman in a rental condo, by the next occupants. At first the three women appeared to have been murdered where they were found, with the murder weapons at the scene: Pennybacker's skull crushed by a blood-covered wooden stick; Dombrowski shot in the head by the .32 caliber gun found next to her body; and Gelman bludgeoned by the fifteen-pound dumbbell near her.

Medical examination revealed that these were postmortem wounds and that each woman had been strangled by a soft ligature, perhaps rubber tubing. They had all been sexually assaulted before death, with bruising of the genital area but no penetration. There were no hair samples or bodily fluids at the scene of the crime. In addition, each victim had been bled, probably by syringe, and splashes of their blood were found at the next crime scene. They had been murdered elsewhere and placed at the scenes.

I picked up the crime-scene psychological profile. The profiler had been Warren Schuster, trained at Quantico, now a consultant in private practice.

All three crime scenes had a number of similarities. The women were partially clothed and appeared to have been killed by surprise, in the middle of an activity: Pennybacker sitting in front of a makeup mirror; Dombrowski in the kitchen, in front of an open refrigerator; and Gelman in the foyer with money in her hand, perhaps making change for a delivery. The reality of the murders was quite the opposite. All three endured multiple, near-death strangulations along with repeated, unsuccessful attempts at penetration both anal and vaginal.

Schuster concluded that the crimes represented two levels of reality. One, the final scenes of partially clad women, surprised and quickly killed, was based on an actual event, probably from the killer's adolescence. The killer had been, perhaps, a peeping Tom who had been caught by a woman, maybe even reported to the police, hence the undress, the surprise, their being in the middle of ordinary activities. The postmortem wounds were the revenge of the discovered voyeur for her reporting him to the authorities, or laughing at him when she discovered him. The actual murders were the enactments of his fantasies. What he wanted to do to the women as he watched them. What he hadn't done the first time.

Schuster suggested they look for a white male, early twenties, with a history of sexual offenses such as obscene phone calls, exposing himself, peeping into houses. He would have an extensive collection of pornography, probably emphasizing sadomasochistic themes, and have at least one camera with telephoto lenses. I'd have said the same thing.

The police put that together with the commonalities of the locations and began to look at delivery men, cable installers, cleaning services, utility repairmen, mailmen. They were linking the profile to those who had the opportunity to get into the locations with the bodies. They also videotaped the crowds that showed up at each crime scene.

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There at the intersection of history, opportunity, and obsession stood Earl Munsey, a vocational-school work-study employee of Beauty Kleen Restorations, Inc., a cleaning service with contracts that included all three locations. At fifteen, Earl had been arrested on a charge that he had spied on a neighbor going from her bedroom to her shower. That charge brought forth three other complainants. He was convicted and given a suspended sentence and placed in a residential facility for a year. He continued with outpatient counseling and community-service hours cleaning the bathrooms at the city park. That led to his employment with Beauty Kleen. A search warrant of his parents' home turned up dozens of bondage magazines and videos, but no cameras. He also had a file about all the crimes sealed in a plastic bag and suspended from the floor vent in his bedroom into the ductwork. Earl had keys to all the locations, and although he was not assigned to the crews that were cleaning them, he could have easily gained access with the bodies. He was in the videotapes of the crowds at all three crime scenes. The neighbors all described Earl as a "strange duck," a "lurker," not a stalker, but always in the background, watching women, then scurrying off when their eyes met his.

I flipped over to the counseling notes from the residential facility. Psychological testing showed that Earl had an IQ of 82, was dyslexic, learning disabled by a sequential processing disorder, and attention deficit disordered. He had poor impulse controls, was often flooded by his feelings, used fantasy to excess to relieve chronic feelings of depression and emptiness. He was passive, easily suggestible, quite concrete in his thinking and rigid in his judgments. The therapist noted that Earl was unable to articulate why he had been watching the women and denied doing it even though there had been numerous witnesses. Therapy was eventually terminated as unproductive, and he was recommended for a job that was structured and did not involve contact with the public. That was the last anyone heard of Earl Munsey for three years.

The police had all they needed for an arrest. Earl was Mirandized and waived having an attorney present. Prosecutors would later argue that his psychological evaluation was not known to them at the time and that the standard error of the measure of an IQ of 82 could place it in the average range and his consent should have been considered competent. He was questioned by Detectives Ermentraut and Bigelow for almost forty-eight straight hours. At the end of which Earl Munsey signed a confession to the three murders.

I read the confession. There was no mention of how Earl Munsey lured the women into his van, which was presumed to be where the killings took place, or managed to keep from leaving a single piece of forensic evidence tying him to the crime. Earl claimed to have been in a fog and that it "wasn't him" who had picked up the women. The murders, however, were described in gruesome detail.

The prosecution charged Earl with capital murder while committing

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felony sexual assault, attempted rape, and sodomy and asked for the death penalty. Without too much protest from Otis Weems, they got it.

Clipped to the back of the file was a bag of photographs from the crime scenes. I looked at the backs and arranged them in order. There was no identification of who took the photos, Ermentraut or Bigelow.

First was Joleen Pennybacker on the floor in front of a makeup mirror. Perfumes and potpourri were spilled on the floor. She was nude except for a pair of fur wraps around her neck. Next to her was a bloody wooden stick matted with her hair and brains.

Martha Dombrowski lay on the kitchen floor clad only in a college T-shirt. Food from the open refrigerator lay around her, a can, ground meat, donuts, and a .32-caliber pistol that had left her with a small round hole in the middle of her forehead.

Eleanor Gelman was in the entrance foyer, also clad only in a college T-shirt. She had a twenty-dollar bill in her right hand, and there were some coins around her left hand. Next to her was a bloody, crusted dumbbell with five-pound plates.

I closed the file. Monica Chao had things to work with, especially the confession, but I didn't see how I could help her. The profile and crime-scene analysis made sense to me. I could see Earl Munsey doing this crime. Maybe the confession was coerced and there were gaps in it. Maybe they shouldn't have convicted him. Maybe she could parlay that into a new trial. That didn't mean he didn't do it. Not in the post-O. J. world.

I called Monica Chao and told her I had no ideas and that I would return the file to her. She asked if I could come by tonight. She had some more information that she had received by court order and she didn't want to waste time. I got directions to her place and drove over.

She opened the door and motioned me inside. Monica wore running shoes, jean skirt, and a cream-colored blouse knotted at the midriff. Her hair was pulled back into a glossy ponytail. A young boy, perhaps five, stood in the center of the living room.

"This is my son, Justin. Justin, say hello to Dr. Triplett." Justin approached with his hand out but a somber look on his face. We shook hands and he turned back to his game on the floor.

"Listen, I just wanted to drop this off. I'll let you get back to whatever . . ."

She ushered me into the kitchen. "Justin's upset right now. His father and I separated a couple of months ago. He keeps hoping we'll get back together again. Whenever somebody comes over, he's hoping it's his dad. When it's not, he's disappointed."

"Listen, I don't have anything to tell you. Not from a psychological point of view. You have the confession to work with. . . ."

"No, I don't. Weems argued that on the first appeal. That and the consent. He lost. I don't have anything. Before you give up on this, look at what I got today at the office. It's the photos from Ermentraut and Bigelow. Along with their notes. The photos you saw were from the first officers on the scene, the patrolmen."

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"Okay, I'll look at them," I said resentfully, ready to be out from under one of her rocks. "How late are you going to be up tonight? I'll drop them back when I'm done."

"You can do it here. I've got an office set up next to the living room. Justin and I were about to eat. Why don't you look at the stuff, stay for dinner, and tell me what you think. I'm making hot-and-sour soup and Dan Dan noodles, it's Justin's favorite."

"What's Dan Dan noodles?"

"It's a spicy chili peanut sauce over noodles. Very good."

"Okay. Where are the photos?" The sooner I started, the sooner I was done.

"In my office, on the desk. I'll let you know when we're ready to eat."

I walked out of the kitchen and across the living room. Justin was on his elbows and knees, staring down at a board on the floor before him. His chin rested in the cup of his palms.

I turned into the first door on the left, sat down at Monica's desk, and put the file next to her printer. I picked up the photographs. They were larger than the ones the patrolmen had taken. I propped them up side by side in front of the computer screen. I flipped up Ermentraut's notebook and read his notes.

Joleen Pennybacker: four bloodstains on floor; furs not part of house decor; potpourri?: lab says it's dried thyme leaves; perfumes: Escada and Opium, from the house; wooden stick: solid maple—look at local cabinetmakers, furniture repair shops.

I looked at Joleen Pennybacker: young, slim, ghostly pale in the harsh flash light. The pool of blood under her head black, not red. Lying on her back, eyes wide, hands up, fingers spread as if startled by someone standing in front of her. Had she been sitting? Why no chair? The two furs draped over her shoulder and around her neck. Trying them on before she got dressed? A gift? The sensuous feel of fur on skin? The potpourri and perfume spilled on the floor. As if she'd pulled them over in a struggle or standing up to flee. Someone she'd seen in the mirror. The bloody stick that stopped her.

I picked up Martha Dombrowski's picture. I tilted it under the light then reached over and turned on Monica's desk lamp. In the corners, four dark stains. Just like the first scene. Repetition becomes ritual. Another indicator that these tableaux had symbolic meaning to the killer. He was putting order on his chaos. Shaping it to give him release from his hungers. For the moment.

Martha was older, softer. Again on her back. Nude except for the T-shirt. A college. I brought the photo closer: University of California. She, too, had her hands up as if startled and a pool of black blood under her head. There was food strewn around her and the refrigerator door was open. The dropped gun. She hears someone, has food in her hands, a midnight snack perhaps, turns, sees the killer. Only he is not a killer yet. She sees him watching her. She's going to report him, like the first one did. He can't let that happen. He shoots her. He drops the gun and

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runs. Ritual reenactments of his trauma, his shame, only he's rewritten the end. They don't tell, they die. He escapes to watch them again. Better yet, he does what he only dreamed of the first time. But he can't. Even with them subdued, restrained, he can't get it up, can't put it in. A level of inhibition even this degree of control and power can't conquer. Twisted religious upbringing? What did Munsey's parents do to him?

Thank God they caught this guy. He'd have kept doing this until he was able to penetrate his victims. And then he'd have kept on anyway, just hyphenating his career: serial killer-rapist.

I looked at the notes. Food: can of baked beans, open with lid; package of ground meat; box of donuts. The food belonged to the owners of the house. T-shirt: University of California. Neither the victim nor the residents attended the school. Boyfriend? Killer? Blood not the victim's. Match for #1. The gun was a .32-caliber H & R. No serial number. A later note said ballistics couldn't match it with any other killings and they hadn't been able to trace its owner.

The last picture was Eleanor Gelman. Again the four bloodstains. Again the body nude except for a college T-shirt. This time it's the University of Richmond. Was Munsey's first victim, the one who reported him, a college student? She's on her back in the foyer. This time her hands have money in them. Coins all around the left one, dropped when she's startled, a twenty in her right. For whom? Where's her purse? I scanned the corners of the photo to see if it was on the floor or hanging from a doorknob. Why get it out to give to someone? She's only half dressed. So many questions but the answer is always the same—silence. Her head sits in a pool of blood. Satan's halo, viscous, sickly sweet, the light shining off bits of bone and brain. I looked at the dumbbell. There was a difference with this one. Her ankles were tied. With what?

I looked at Ermentraut's notes. Bloodstains not the victim's. Same as victim #2. T-shirt—victim did not go to University of Richmond. Her son? Money: 7 cents—all pennies. Ankles: rubber tubing. Chemistry supplies? M.E. says consistent with ligatures on all three victims.

I stared at all three pictures. A triptych from Earl Munsey's unconscious. The same scene over and over again, unchanging forever. That's one definition of hell.

"Are you staying for dinner?"

I looked down. Justin stood there just as somber as before. Dark eyes peering up from under his bowl-cut black hair.

"I was going to. Your mom offered since I'm helping her with her work. Is that okay with you?"

Justin put his hand on my arm. "Do you know my dad?"

"No, I don't," I said gently.

"Oh." He turned away, then back. "Can you play with me? Just until Mom calls me to eat?"

I looked at the photos. Nothing there. I might as well play with the little guy. His dad would if he were here.

"Sure. Just until your mom calls."

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I pushed away from the console and followed him into the living room. A sliding-glass door and surrounding windows let plenty of light into the room and it bounced off the dark parquet floor. A large-screen TV sat in the center of the far wall surrounded by a built-in bookcase. I scanned the books: cookbooks, exercise books, books on divorce and child-rearing, romances, mysteries, arts and crafts, everything but law books. A low, cream-colored leather sofa and chair set encircled a wood and glass coffee table. A free-form cypress base with bronze claws gripping a palette-shaped glass top.

Justin sat down in between the table and the sofa and picked up a plastic frame. I thought about squeezing in next to him but chose an adjoining side of the table. His mother poked her head around the corner.

"We'll eat in just a couple of minutes." Then she lifted her head up towards me.

"Anything?"

"Where do you stand on feeding the messenger?"

"We feed them in these parts. Good news or bad."

"I still don't see anything."

"Okay."

Justin scooted over towards me and handed me the frame. It was covered with numbered plastic shingles.

"How do you play, Justin?"

"It's a memory game. You have to remember where the matching pictures are. When they match you take them off the board."

"Show me. We'll do this one for practice. It won't count, okay?"

"Okay. See, here is a pony, and this one is a pony. So I take them off." He lifted two numbered shingles, revealing the ponies. Off they came, revealing another layer underneath.

"What's this, Justin?" I asked, noticing that he was sitting right up next to my leg and starting to list to starboard. I hoped that he wouldn't climb into my lap, so I called out for help.

"How's dinner coming?"

"Couple more minutes, that's all." And so the *Titanic* was lost.

"This is the next part," he said, now looking up at me from the space between the board and my chest.

"Once you uncover the board, you have to guess the puzzle. That's hard. I have a good memory, but my mom gets the puzzles right. That's how she wins. She's really smart. She's a lawyer."

"I'm sure she is, Justin. Since this is just practice, I'm going to look at the puzzle. Maybe I can show you some tricks. Help you beat your mom."

"Cool," he said and clapped his hands.

I pulled the backing up and looked at it. "You know, Justin, if your memory is good, you might try to uncover the corners first. That puts a frame on the puzzle. It's a lot easier to figure out from the edges in instead of the middle out."

A chill went down my back and out my arms as the picture in my

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head disappeared and a great white shape rushed to breach into recognition on the vast empty sea of my mind.

I stood up, handed Justin the board, and hurried back to the office. Sliding into the chair, I pulled an empty legal pad in front of me and stared at the pictures.

"Aren't we going to play anymore?" Justin asked forlornly, from the doorway.

I looked over my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Justin. This is very important. I'll play with you when I'm done. I promise. Okay?"

"You promise?"

"Yes. I promise, Justin."

He stood there trying to decide the worth of my word, weighing it against the collection of promises he already held. He turned and walked away. I heard the shingles spill onto the wooden floor.

His mother appeared in the doorway. "What happened? He just ran into his room. Dinner's on."

"I'm sorry. I was playing with him when I got this idea about Munsey and the murders. I bolted over here to try it out and I told him I couldn't play with him now. I'll just scoop this stuff up and take it back to my place. Let you and him get on with dinner."

She came towards me. "Do you have something?"

"No, no. I have an idea. I need to try it out. It's probably nothing. I really need to get on it while it's fresh, before I lose it." I started to take the pictures down.

"No, no," she said, palms up in retreat. "Stay here. I'll close the door. We'll be quiet. Do what you have to. We don't have any time to spare. If you've got an idea, run with it. Do you want any food?"

"No, thank you. How about a cup of coffee? You might want to put on a pot. This could take awhile."

"Sure. Coming right up." She shook her fists in excitement and disappeared.

I wondered if this scene had been played out before, with her husband. The disappointed child, the abandoned dinner, work demands taking priority. Eventually sliding from a separation that was impromptu and random to one that was formalized and permanent.

I didn't need food. I was burning up excitement as fuel, the same excitement I felt every time I had panned golden nuggets of meaning out of the onrushing blur of life. So far, that had turned out to be the one enduring passion of my life.

I drew diagrams and schematics, scribbled translations and made lists and erased them all. The hours wore on. The refills of coffee told me so. The trash can filled, then overflowed. I kept drawing and writing. Eventually, the tide of erasures receded and I was left with a single page of work. The clock said two A.M. when Monica knocked on the doorframe.

"How's it going?"

"Gone as far as I can. I'm done."

"Want something to eat?"

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"No, thanks. I'm caffeinated to the eyeballs. I can't eat when I'm wired like this."

She slid down along the wall until she sat cross-legged on the floor. She sipped from a steamy mug. "So?" she said, dipping her head in anticipation, her eyes as somber as her son's had been.

I took off my glasses, rubbed my eyes for a minute, put the glasses back on, and turned to the pictures.

"I was playing that game with Justin and telling him how frames help solve puzzles, when it occurred to me. There were frames on these murder scenes. See here." I pointed to the bloodstains around each body. "They aren't from the victims. Ermentraut's notes say that, or I think they do. They're unnecessary to the scene. There's plenty of blood all over the place from the head injuries. Why the frame? What does a frame do?"

Monica shrugged. "I don't know. I've never actually been at a crime scene."

"A frame tells you what the field of information is. What's inside is important, what's outside is not. Serial killers don't frame their work. They know what's important. They arrange it just so. They remove what's irrelevant. When it's just right, when it's satisfying, they stop. That's the 'art,' if you want, in the composition.

"If Schuster's right, then this is Earl Munsey's ritual reenactment of his shame, changed to include his fantasized torture and rape and revenge. Very satisfying. This is a scene by Earl for Earl. There's no need for a frame. Suppose, just suppose, this isn't a construction for the killer's own use, own pleasure. Who is it for? It's a construction. There's no question about that. He brought the bodies, the weapons, the blood, the props. Who's going to see this? The police. It's a message to them. They need a frame. They have ignorant eyes. They don't know what to attend to, what to ignore. He's helping us poor dumb bastards along. He's jumping up and down, waving his arms, saying Here I am, here I am."

"Did you figure out the messages?" A tentative, hopeful smile emerged across her narrow oval face.

"I think so."

"What do they say?"

"Bear with me. I have to explain this step by step. The logic seemed inescapable to me when I was doing it. But delusions can be quite logical, too. You have to understand it and believe it. If I can't convince you, you can't convince anyone else."

"The typical way of interpreting a crime scene for clues to the killer's personality is actuarial and symbolic. What do most serial killers have in common? What are the significant correlates? What needs do certain acts satisfy? For example, why mutilate the face? Why take souvenirs? And so on. We're talking about translating their hidden, obscure inner language because they're talking to themselves, not us.

"Suppose this guy is talking to us. He speaks our language. How do we read? Left to right. Top to bottom. So I looked at what was inside the frames. Here is Joleen Pennybacker."

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I picked up the photo and used my hands to frame her body. "Left to right: furs, body, potpourri. Top to bottom: perfume, bloody stick. Gibberish, right? That's what I've been doing all night. Trying every different category that might describe each element, trying to make sentences out of them."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

"What do they say?"

"First, there are rules to the messages. All languages have grammar and syntax. Ignore the bodies. They're irrelevant, zeros, place-holders. Without them there is no crime scene. No crime. He killed these women as bait. To draw us in as an audience. That's why there's no penetration. His driving need isn't sexual, it's narcissism. He demonstrates his power by leaving an abundance of clues that nobody gets. He's diddling us, not them. He's been laughing at us for two years now."

"Those poor women. You're saying he killed them just to show us how smart he is, that he could get away with it. This is incredible." She shuddered.

"Don't say that. It has to be credible. Otherwise Earl Munsey fries for this. His eyes explode, his blood boils, his hair bursts into flame. And this bastard laughs all the way to hell.

"This is Joleen Pennybacker. Furs; thyme, not potpourri. It was all dried thyme; scents, not perfumes. The murder weapon, a blood-covered stick, a red stick. Furs, thyme, scents, red stick. *First time since Redstick.* He's announcing his appearance. He's telling us where he came from. I did this one and I said, Triplett, you're crazy. You've tortured the data beyond recognition. You're the infinite number of monkeys. *Voilà!* Random hammering on the keys and we get *Hamlet.* Once, perhaps. What if they're all meaningful and related? God couldn't make enough monkeys to pull that off."

I picked up the next picture. "This is Martha Dombrowski. Remember, ignore her body. Left to right: can, not food, not beans; look at the T-shirt: University of California, UC is visible, the rest needs a magnifying glass; and meat. Then: a donut and a gun. Can UC meat. Donut a gun. *Can you see me? Done it again.* Again. Number two. It only makes sense as the second of a series. They either both make sense or neither of them does."

I exchanged photos. "Here's Eleanor Gelman. These coins, I counted them. All pennies. Copper. Coppers. The shirt: University of Richmond, same maker. UR, then a dumbbell. The twenty, that stumped me. Money, greenbacks, dollars, currency, a bill, Bill, his name? It's Jackson's face on the bill. See how her thumb is pressed over it. Then her ankles. Tied? Knot? Tube? Hose? Bound." I stopped to see if she was convinced. She looked like she was trying to suppress a grimace. Her plum-colored lips darkened.

"*Cops, you are dumbbells, Jackson bound.*" He's going to Jackson. That's where his next victims will be found. Some town named Jackson."

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I leaned back. Monica looked into her cup. No help there.

"I know: A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Perhaps, but I know one thing for certain. A demonstrable scientific fact."

"What's that?"

"If I'm right, Earl Munsey couldn't have killed those women."

"Why?"

"He's dyslexic, and he has a sequencing disorder. He reverses letters and words. He couldn't put a rebus together."

"A rebus?"

"That's what I think they are. It's a kind of puzzle where images stand for the syllables of words.

"We're halfway home. If I'm right, then Earl Munsey is indeed innocent. Now we have to prove that I'm right. But that's for tomorrow," I looked at the clock, "or later, whichever comes first."

"You can crash here if you want. I made up the bed in the guest room."

"No, I don't think so. Besides, wouldn't that get you in hot water with your ex? Most custody orders forbid overnight guests of the opposite sex."

"Yeah, well, John isn't in any position to dictate terms to me. Not with him out every night being true to his new gay identity. I may have been just a treatment plan for John when we were married, but I'm a whole lot more trouble now." She nodded, agreeing with herself.

I remembered why I quit doing custody work and switched to criminal. Too much violence in the custody work.

"I just think it'd be confusing for Justin to find me here when he wakes up. Tell him I haven't forgotten my promise. I'll play with him next time I'm over." I wondered if she'd remember to do that. If not, I'd call him myself. If you couldn't keep your word to a child your priorities were in serious disarray.

I put my work in the file, took my mug to the kitchen pass-through, and wished Monica good night.

"Thank you for everything. Even if you can't prove your theory, I appreciate how hard you've worked, and I'll tell Earl you did all you could. But I have faith in you. If it's there, you'll find it, that's what Paul Talaverde said about you."

"Yeah, well, even a stopped clock is right twice a day. I'll call you when I know something." I waved and turned down the steps.

"Good night, Dr. Triplett. And good luck."

She was still outlined in the doorway, her head resting against the frame, when I drove away.

The first thing I did the next day was call Ermentraut. He was in court, so I left a message. Then I tried Bigelow.

"Homicide, Detective Bigelow."

"Detective, this is Dr. Ransom Triplett. I wonder if I could have a couple of minutes of your time."

"Couple of minutes, sure. What about?"

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"Earl Munsey."

"Oh Christ. Are you one of those bleeding hearts that thinks we shouldn't execute this bastard? Let me tell you something. I was there. At the scene. At the morgue. I saw what he did. I'll sleep like a baby the day they serve him up the juice of justice. Goodbye . . ."

"Whoa, whoa, just a second, please. This is not about whether he should be executed. I've been going over the file as a consultant to his attorney. Personally, I think you guys have the right man."

"Damn straight we do. And another thing, that confession was pristine. Clean all through. We never touched him. We read him his rights. What were we supposed to do? Talk him out of it? Oh no, Mr. Munsey, that would be unwise, here, let us call a lawyer for you. Why don't we just stop trying to catch anybody? He freaking confessed. What do these people want?"

"Well, detective, I just want to ask you a couple of small questions, so I can explain them to his attorney. It just might put this whole thing to rest."

"Okay, what is it?"

"The things that were around the body. That Munsey planted at the scene . . ."

"You mean like the gun, the tubing, that stuff?"

"Yeah. Did any of that lead anywhere?"

"No. The stuff at the first scene came from the model home. Except the herbs that he spilled. We took his picture to local groceries. Nothing. The food was from the owners. The gun was a Saturday-night special, cold, no serial numbers. We hit all the gun shops, the known dealers. No one could ID Munsey. Same thing for the tubing, the dumbbell. He could have gotten them anywhere. Yard sales—hell, he could have stolen them out of a garage. None of that stuff went anywhere."

"Last question. The blood spatters on the floor. Detective Ermentraut's notes aren't clear. The blood spatters at the scenes aren't the victims'. Whose were they?"

"Uh, let me remember. I think it was victim number one's blood at the second scene and number two's at the next one. Yeah, that's right."

"Could you tell me the victims' blood types?"

"Yeah, hold on. We pulled that jacket on account of people like you. This one is not gonna get away."

I doodled on my pad. Zeros, large ones, small ones. Then I linked them. All the little naughts going nowhere. Earl Munsey was moving slowly, inexorably towards eternity.

"Okay. Here's the lab report. You want the DNA markers and everything, or just the type?"

"Blood type is fine."

"Girl number one was O positive. Girl number two was AB. Girl number three was B positive. No, that's the stains. The girls were AB, B positive, and A."

"You ever find the third girl's blood?"

"No. He must have stashed it somewhere. We figure he'd have

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used it at the next scene. But then there wasn't a next scene."

"Thanks, detective."

"No problem. Six days and it won't matter anymore."

"Yeah," I said and hung up. Unless you're wrong. Then six days from now it'll matter forever.

I spent the next two days pursuing my theory without any success, although my geographical knowledge was enormously enriched. I learned that there were eighteen Jacksons in the United States, strung from California to New Jersey and from Minnesota to Louisiana. Almost all were small towns with few homicides and not one that looked at all like my rebus killer.

Then I tried Red Stick. Make no mistake about it. There is not one Redstick, U.S.A. There are six Red Oaks and five Redwoods and I called them all. No murders at all like mine.

I sat on the porch, watching one of Earl Munsey's last four sunsets. A gin and tonic slowly diluted on the table next to me. I had nothing. A theory that tortured me with its plausibility, that I refused to accept as a statistical chimera, a product of just enough monkeys scribbling associations to three pictures. Maybe it was data rape, me forcing myself all over the pictures. They yielded up a facsimile of meaning, enough to get me to roll off, grunting in satisfaction, while they lay there, mute in the darkness, their secrets still unknown.

Well, it hadn't been good for me, either. We were running out of time and I had no ideas, bright or otherwise. The phone rang.

"Dr. Triplett. This is Monica Chao. I was wondering how you were doing. We're running out of time."

"I know. How am I doing? Not well at all. I've called every Jackson, every Redwood, every Red Oak in the country. Nothing. I don't know what else to do. Maybe it's all a mirage, an illusion. They aren't rebuses at all. The fact that I've created these sentences is a monument to human inventiveness in the face of complexity and ambiguity. Or I'm right. They are rebuses and I'm just not good enough to translate them correctly. Maybe we need more monkeys. I don't know. Whoever the killer is, he and I don't seem to speak the same language."

I forgot all about Monica. I felt an avalanche slowing, turning on itself, turning into a kaleidoscope, slowing further, settling, stopping, halted. The pattern blazed through my mind. I began to laugh, a cleansing cackle of satisfaction. Had I seen the truth or only applied even finer filigree to my delusion? One call would tell all. I heard someone calling my name in the distance.

"Monica, I have to go. I'll call you right back. I think I've solved it. I hope I have."

I dialed the operator, got the area code I wanted, and then dialed information for the police department's central phone number. I was shuttled through departments toward Homicide.

A voice answered, "Thibault."

"Baton Rouge Homicide?" I said, savoring each syllable.

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"Yeah. Who is this?"

I gave my name. "Detective Thibault, I'm working on a case here in Virginia. A man's going to be executed in four days for a series of murders up here. Some last-minute evidence has emerged that may link him to murders elsewhere. Baton Rouge in particular. If so, they would have been at least three years ago. Were you in Homicide then?"

"Doctor, I investigated Cain. I've been twenty-seven years in Homicide in this city. There ain't hardly a murder here I don't know something about, but they're also startin' to run together. I'm due to retire end of the year. I hope this one had a flourish, or four days won't do it."

"Our killer," I said, glad to relinquish ownership, "had an unusual MO. He only killed women and then he placed the bodies in conspicuous locations, where they were sure to be found."

"Got to do better than that, Doc. That's half of our murders. How'd he do 'em?"

"He strangled them after an attempted sexual assault. But at the crime scenes there were weapons found, or rather planted, so that it looked like the victims had been killed where they were found. Clubs, guns, that sort of thing."

"That doesn't ring any bells. Anything else?"

"He took some blood from each victim and he'd spatter it around the next crime scene."

Thibault was silent for a minute. When he spoke his voice was strangely hoarse. "Your boy's gonna go when, four days, you said?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Let me ask you a question. Your first victim, what kind of blood type?"

"AB, but—"

We finished the sentence in harmony. "The bloodstains were O positive."

"Yes," I said, flooded with elation. "When did these killings occur?"

"They started five years ago. There were four of them over the course of a year. Then they stopped."

"That's great. Do you have the lab work on these stains?"

"Yeah. They're in the file. I'd have to go dig it out, but I could fax it to you. Take an hour or so."

"If the blood's a match, our guy couldn't have done it. He was in a residential facility that whole year. This is great. Listen, I don't want to be rude, but I've got to call the lawyer with this news."

Thibault's voice was thick and weary when he spoke.

"As soon as you know, Doc, call me right back. You see, if your boy didn't do it, and that's our blood at the scene, then I've got a call to make. 'Cause our guy didn't do it, either. And his next of kin aren't going to like that one little bit."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I would like to thank the following people for their help with this story: noted defense attorney Peter Greenspun; Dr. Jane Greenstein; Constance Knott; Officer Adam K. Schutz; Dr. Mark E. Schutz; and my son, Jakob Lindenberger-Schutz, who solved it in a flash.

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A PUBLISHER'S DREAM

by Phil Lovesey

With his first novel, *Death Duties*, just off the presses in England—and receiving rave reviews!—Phil Lovesey returns to *EQMM* with a story about the celebrity successful mystery authors often enjoy. The young British writer knows all about the world of mystery fandom, for his father, Peter Lovesey, has long been a favorite of both English and American readers—and it's expected that Phil soon will be too!

"God, how I envy you chaps," the publisher began, leafing through the battered typed manuscript. "It's always been an ambition of mine to write a best-seller. Somehow, the joyful experience just eluded me."

Gideon Plank shifted uncomfortably, anxious not to upset the man who seemed so taken with his novel. I guess it's just a matter of time," he offered, mindful of the many hours spent torturously crafting the damn book in a damp bedsit just outside Reading. "It can't be easy running a publishing business. I suppose I was just lucky, in so much as I had the time and space to write it."

The portly publisher conceded the point. "Even so," he mused, "it's an author's life, really. And I'm not saying it's not without its drawbacks, but there're precious few careers which allow one to indulge oneself quite so completely before such an adoring public." He pointed to several well-known faces framed on the wall, famous authors, each striking the required "intellectual yet instantly approachable" pose. "How pleasant it must be," he said, "to know an army of eager fans eagerly awaits every word which trips so delicately from the imagination onto the printed page. I'd give a hell of a lot for that, Mr. Plank."

Gideon smiled, trying to suppress any premature feelings of excitement. Old duffer that the publisher undoubtedly was, he still owned one of London's largest literary concerns, and more to the point, seemed unduly excited about Gideon's tentative foray into the world of mystery fiction. He held his breath in the silence, barely daring to imagine that it was the remotest possibility that he might be published.

The publisher turned Gideon's manuscript over in his hands once

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more. "I want to publish," he said. "It's a good book, eloquently written, with a most original prose style." He held out a soft fat hand. "Welcome on board, Mr. Plank. And congratulations."

Gideon offered a tiny hand in return, eyes twinkling with delight. God, it had been a hard struggle, but somehow every trial and tribulation incurred in writing the book vanished as he grasped the publisher's puffy paw in his own. He sat back, utterly elated in the afterglow of his own efforts. He was going to be published. The euphoria, however, was short-lived.

"I should point out, Mr. Plank, that we do have one or two slight problems."

Gideon sat straighter in the leather chair, wishing for the millionth time his feet might touch the ground. "Problems?"

"Nothing wrong with the book," the publisher beamed patronisingly. "More to do with its author."

"I'm sorry?"

"Your stature, Mr. Plank."

Gideon stared uncomprehendingly at the sagging face opposite his own, scarcely believing he was being manipulated into stating the obvious. The whole notion seemed too absurd, and furthermore, totally unrelated to the critical and commercial merits of the manuscript lying so innocently on the table between them. "My stature?" was all he could say, hoping against some incredible hope that he'd completely misheard the man.

"Your size, Mr. Plank."

Gideon extended two child-sized arms. "I'm a dwarf," he said. "Is that a problem?"

The publisher waited before replying, examining the ceiling carefully while formulating an answer. "Mr. Plank," he said eventually, one hand on the manuscript. "You've given me a great book. A terrific first novel. This company takes a great many risks when it publishes a new author. We gamble thousands of pounds, hoping that the public will like what they see, buy it, read it, then look out for the next one."

Gideon could sense what was coming. Besides, he'd taken his own gamble in writing the damn thing. They liked the book, they had the machinery to print the book, the marketing department to sell the thing, what sort of a gamble would they actually be taking? Unless. . . . He spared the publisher the embarrassment of saying it. "You mean the book won't sell if it's written by a dwarf?"

The publisher tried his best to look empathetic. "The retailers want a package, Mr. Plank. The book forms maybe fifty percent of that."

"And the other fifty?" Gideon pressed.

"The author," the publisher replied, trying his most humble expression.

Gideon reached for the manuscript. "So this has all been a waste of time, has it?" he snapped. "You loved the book until you saw me? Until

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you realised there wasn't that big a market for mystery novels written by 'genetically restricted' people?"

The publisher reached into a desk drawer and handed Gideon a spiral-bound catalogue entitled "Models 16."

"What's this?"

The publisher smiled. "The home of the new Gideon Plank, Mr. Plank. Or as I think he should be called from now on, James St. James."

Disbelievingly, Gideon flicked through the catalogue, watching as page after page of male models fell through his stubby fingers.

"Page twenty-seven," the publisher said helpfully. "I think he's our man, don't you?"

Gideon stopped at the appropriate spread, to be warmly greeted by a black-and-white photostat of a mature man in a variety of leisurely and athletic poses. "I'm not sure I . . .?"

The publisher smiled warmly. "Quite the perfect fellow, isn't he? Square-jawed, broad-shouldered, dazzling smile, with just the correct air of literary arrogance and smouldering charm. The women will love him. And so, in turn, will you."

"He's me?" said Gideon incredulously.

The publisher lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "It's a free-market economy, old chap. I don't make the rules, but I do make a lot of money. Were it up to me, I'd publish you as you are. But I have to look at the risks involved." He placed the open modeling catalogue next to Gideon's manuscript. "Your literary talent and his looks could make for a highly lucrative combination."

Gideon's enlarged forehead began to swim. "You mean," he said slowly, "I write the stuff, and this mannequin takes the credit?"

"I prefer to look at it this way, Mr. Plank. James St. James does all the PR work, leaving you the time and space to do what you're best at. After all, you don't want to be worried about signings, speeches, and conferences while working on your next opus, do you? You have the talent, he has the looks, I have the expertise and connections. Together, we all have an incredible opportunity. A viable package."

"But it's my book," Gideon protested. "My ideas, my graft. It's nothing to do with James St. James."

The publisher stood and towered over the tiny author. "Mr. Plank," he said, "do you want to get rich?"

"Well, I . . . er . . ."

"Not one single retailer will chance their shelf space on an untested mystery novel by an anonymous dwarf. Sounds cruel, but that's how it is." He fixed Gideon with his most persuasive stare. "Your book, by the physically acceptable, dare I say exceptionally handsome James St. James, could be riding high in the bestseller list for weeks. You get the money, Mr. Plank, eighty percent of it anyway, James St. James takes the rest. Either way, it's a paltry price to pay for your anonymity. You turn them out, he sells them. And no one need ever know. You'll never

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even meet the man. It's the only way you're ever going to get anywhere, Mr. Plank, believe me."

Gideon began to feel as if the whole afternoon was tumbling away from him. "So you're saying people only buy books if the author complies to accepted standards? That no one will buy a copy of the latest Gideon Plank simply because I had to sit on a cushion to write the thing?"

"No, no, no," the publisher replied. "Any dwarf—"

"Person of restricted growth," Gideon corrected through gritted teeth.

"Any person of restricted growth who happens to enjoy detective fiction would probably rush to the bookstore," the publisher conceded. "But you must understand, it's a rather restricted market."

"Ha, ha," Gideon sourly replied. "And everything I wrote would have to be stacked on the bottom shelf, no doubt, so all my freakish fans could reach it."

"Not my rules," the publisher replied. "The game's."

As his publisher had so confidently predicted, Gideon's first novel, *Grave Injustice*, by James St. James, made the bestseller list for seventeen weeks. And so began two amazing years of change, seeing Gideon move from the damp bedsit into a charming Cotswold cottage, secluded from an unknowing public by three acres of finely tended gardens.

Novel number two eclipsed the first, while number three propelled the name of James St. James into literary stardom. For Gideon, the hours spent tapping at his word processor seemed all the more enjoyable for the clandestine hoax he was pulling. At nights he would waddle down to his local pub and enjoy every moment of his anonymity, feeling as if he'd slipped past the doormen at the Ritz to take afternoon tea without a tie. Occasionally he'd find himself at the same table as someone engrossed in the latest James St. James, and drew much comfort from the fact that he could sip his pint in contented silence while the reader remained transfixed in his narrative, ignorant of the real author's presence just a few feet away.

Then things began to change. James St. James grew from a rugged black-and-white photo grinning reassuringly on the jackets of Gideon's books into a media obsession. Gideon watched with increasing dismay as the square-jawed pretender to his literary throne began to appear on a succession of arts shows. After a few months it seemed Gideon could hardly turn on the radio or television without being subjected to James St. James's carefully rehearsed opinions on the growing crime rate, methods and morality contained within his own works, political persuasions, even the lengths he'd gone to in order to redecorate his Kensington home.

Whenever Gideon phoned the publisher to voice his growing concerns, the answer was always the same. Wasn't he happy enough with all the money their "package" was creating? Though in truth, Gideon

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was fast discovering that all the luxury in the world couldn't compensate for an increasingly burning desire for his own recognition.

Gideon titled James St. James's fourth novel *Chameleon*, and centered his story around an understudy who kills the lead actor in a West End show in order to win the role for himself. It was neither a groundbreaking nor particularly good book, but the very name of James St. James, embossed in three-inch gold letters on the cover, ensured it sold eighty thousand copies in less than a month. As expected, the money rolled in, but by now, Gideon had very different plans for James St. James.

An international literary conference was to be held in Birmingham, a huge festival of crime, mystery, and detection, attracting fans from around the world, eager to meet their favourite authors in the flesh. Naturally, James St. James would be attending, giving a live interview in the conference centre's largest theatre, followed by an impromptu question-and-answer session to further delight his devoted audience. When Gideon found out about the convention, he decided two things: firstly, he would attend, and secondly, he would kill James St. James. He didn't need any more money. The whole ridiculous business had to stop.

Gideon told no one he would show up, booking himself into one of the convention's many recommended hotels, and setting out to sample the bizarre atmosphere. Someone had unimaginably entitled the thing "Knives in the Back," although Gideon appreciated the unintentional irony with regards to his own situation. The talk of the conference was the arrival of the magnificent James St. James. Wherever Gideon went, huddled groups of fans, readers, publishers, and agents chatted excitedly about the great man's achievements. And although conference organisers had provided a packed timetable of lectures, master classes, screenings, readings, signings, and authors' panels, there was little doubt who the main attraction really was.

At night, alone in his room, Gideon formulated his plans, leafing through his copy of *Chameleon* for the deliberate inconsistencies he had laid so cunningly on the crisp white pages.

On the last day of the conference, Gideon made his way to the enormous theatre which was to play host to mystery fiction's most popular name. Shuffling through a packed auditorium, he settled in his fifth-row seat, listening to the excited hubbub all around him. It seemed as if every nation was represented by its own group of adoring fans. For his part, Gideon felt a little proud, experiencing at first hand the awesome phenomenon he and his publisher had so devilishly created over the last three years. He noted, too, that the publisher, his partner in crime, was nowhere to be seen. This session seemed to be for fans only.

Eventually, a leading critic took to the stage, introducing the main act for the day. The theatre erupted in applause as two thousand hands clapped enthusiastically, welcoming James St. James into

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their midst. Gideon joined in, aware that to have done otherwise would have drawn premature attention to himself.

There followed an hour-long interview with the charming wordsmith, the audience encouraged to laugh long and loud in all the right places by the merest shrug of his massive shoulders or twitch of his perfectly groomed eyebrow. Even Gideon was forced to admit the man had tremendous presence, and that, in reality, he couldn't have wished for a better salesman for his work. But however much he admired the man, he couldn't suppress the overwhelming urge to end the farce. If anything, he owed it to the fans, devoted readers who'd paid for every improvement in his life, and who now sat around him completely unaware how they'd been deceived. Gideon gave way to a rising sense of shame, and if he could have sunk any lower into his seat, he would have done so.

At the end of the hour, the critic announced James St. James would take questions from the audience. Instantly, Gideon was lost in the forest of hands which shot up all round him. Anticipating the problem, he calmly stood on his chair, waving his programme frantically to be spotted. James St. James, perfectly schooled in PR, nodded encouragingly to Gideon, aware he should always appear gracious to minority audiences.

The crowd hushed as Gideon cleared his throat. "Mr. St. James," he began. "While I acknowledge that your last book, *Chameleon*, is a blistering good read, it leaves several fundamental ends untied. Surely the purpose of mystery fiction is to set the reader a complex puzzle before revealing the complete solution in its entirety?"

If St. James was at all worried by the question, he didn't show it. "Go on," he said politely.

"You expect us to believe," Gideon continued, "that the female lead, the actress, walks calmly into the police station in chapter thirty and tells Detective Michaels the whole story of her affair with the killer. It's almost as if you couldn't be bothered to have Michaels detect anything. As if you just wanted the book finished and decided she'd spill the beans to save you the trouble of anything more elaborate."

St. James smiled, taking the necessary five seconds to look terrific while formulating a response. "*Chameleon* was, for me, something of a departure," he replied. "A more documentary approach to both plot and prose. In short, I suppose what I'm trying so ineloquently to express is the fact that I believe that in real life very few murders are actually solved in the way we have our detective heroes solve them. A terrified grass is, I believe, far more useful than a magnifying glass."

A warm round of laughter and applause greeted the reply, causing Gideon to go for the jugular. "But don't you feel you're perpetrating a hoax on all your fans?"

St. James did his best to look bemused. "I don't see how."

"That you're not really a crime writer at all," Gideon replied, then waited before adding, "in so much as *Chameleon* sets us a puzzle which you only solve by way of a last-minute confession."

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One or two voices nearest to Gideon began to murmur disapprovingly, dismayed by the prolonged attack on their idol. The quality of the writing, the neatness of plot and sharpness of dialogue, were trivial concerns. What mattered was the man himself. If the next James St. James novel was the *Road Atlas of Great Britain*, they'd still be prepared to wait for hours in pouring rain for a signed copy.

Gideon continued his cross-examination for another five minutes, raising question after question regarding the validity of his own deliberately flawed plot. James St. James fired back a series of meaningless replies, each topped with a witty aside for the benefit of his devoted following. When it became evident that others were keen to interrogate their hero, St. James smiled apologetically at Gideon before turning to answer an endless stream of mundane enquiries, principally concerning his private life. Did he work out every day? Did he have a steady partner? Did he wear pyjamas in bed? Gideon shuffled unnoticed from the auditorium, crushed by the experience.

He made straight for one of the many bars, ordering two double whiskys, drinking the first in one shot before climbing unsteadily up onto a barstool, staring morosely into the second. The barman busied himself with chopping fresh fruit for the bar's exotic collection of fresh cocktails.

"Not listening to the great James St. James, then?"

Gideon turned to the young woman to his left. "I have a feeling I know exactly what he's going to say."

She smiled. "Smooth, isn't he?"

"Oily," Gideon growled. "And largely vacuous."

She laughed. "Jealous?"

He finished the second whisky, watching her carefully as she ordered for them both. She was hard-faced, with a husky voice honed by thousands of cigarettes. "You a journalist?" he guessed hopefully.

"Hack," she replied, pushing another whisky along the bar. "Gutter-snoop, social parasite, whatever you want to call me. I'll tell you this much, though, I'm not going to get much copy out of this boring affair. You'd think with a name like 'Knives in the Back,' there'd be something I could get my teeth into."

Gideon felt like jumping for joy. Here, out of the ashes of defeat, rose a magnificent cigarette-smoking tabloid phoenix, waiting to tear her talons into another's flesh. This time, he'd do it properly, kill the whole business stone dead, and let the papers bury James St. James in the morning. "I've got something for you," he said, trembling slightly.

"Uh-huh?"

"An exclusive. Mind-blowing. Shattering."

"Go on."

"James St. James," he said. "I write all his books for him."

For a second she looked stunned, then she began to giggle.

"It's true," Gideon insisted. "Every bloody word is mine. Only I'm not considered as marketable as he is."

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"Right," she laughed. "And I'm Mother Theresa on her day off."

Gideon placed a hand on her forearm, feeling increasingly desperate as she pulled away distastefully. "Come to my house," he begged her. "See the disks, plot structures, character profiles. It's all there."

"You sad bastard." She finished her drink and began to leave the bar.

"I'll even show you his next bloody book!" Gideon cried, watching sorrowfully as she left the bar without looking back.

He ordered another double, watching as a group of children began assembling outside the exit to the main auditorium, each clutching a copy of the books Gideon had written. The barman answered a telephone call, leaving the vicious-looking knife just inches from Gideon's trembling grasp. Apparently St. James would be out in half an hour. Dark thoughts began to cross Gideon's mind.

The following morning, Gideon sat in the fat publisher's London office, staring at the mass of newspapers telling of the tragedy. WHODUNNIT? cried one; ST. JAMES'S FINAL MYSTERY! bayed another. Each front page seemed devoted to the tragic events in Birmingham the previous afternoon.

The publisher lit a long cigar. "An extraordinary turn of events, Mr. Plank," he said. "And as a humble publisher, I feel duty-bound to protect the hard-won reputation of my authors."

Gideon said nothing, numbed by the last twenty-four hours.

"A limited-edition presentation set should do the trick. All St. James's work lovingly presented in a commemorative black box. A final tasteful souvenir for his most ardent admirers."

"You think of everything," Gideon replied bitterly.

"Unlike your good self, Mr. Plank."

"I don't understand."

The publisher blew a large plume of smoke towards the ceiling. "I had a jolly interesting time with the boys in blue yesterday evening, most informative."

"You were in Birmingham?" Gideon asked, a bead of sweat trickling down his back.

"Of course. For the whole three days. You wouldn't have seen me amongst the crowds, but I was there, doing deals, behind the scenes."

"I wasn't there," Gideon stressed.

The publisher tutted. "Come on, Mr. Plank, you're disappointing me. I heard about the little show you put on in the main theatre. Hardly conspicuous behaviour, eh?"

Gideon blushed. "But I didn't kill him. I wanted to, but I didn't do it."

The publisher tutted again, picking up the nearest newspaper and reading aloud. "As the dashing author left the auditorium he was surrounded by a group of excited local schoolchildren begging for autographs. When Mr. St. James duly obliged, the killer struck. An eyewitness reported, 'One minute he was laughing and joking, surrounded by all these kids, the next he just suddenly went down. There

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was panic everywhere, kids screaming and running towards their parents. Everything was a blur. Then we saw he had a knife sticking out of his chest.' Police later traced the murder weapon to the cocktail bar nearby. Seven youngsters were treated for shock, and detectives at the scene admit they are clueless as to how the tragedy could have happened."

Gideon cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Of course," the publisher continued, "I told the police everything I knew. That I'd been lunching at a separate site when the tragedy occurred, and that you were with me. I instructed three others from the company to verify my story."

"I was with you?"

"Don't you remember?" the publisher prompted. "You left the bar twenty minutes before the tragedy happened. We talked business for the next hour, Mr. Plank, after which you left the conference, totally unaware of Mr. St. James's bizarre fate. I suggest you tell the police the same when they come to see you."

"Come to see me?"

The publisher sighed wearily. "You were seen drinking heavily before the attack took place. A woman journalist swears you were acting very strangely." He extinguished the half-smoked cigar. "You've been a very naughty boy, Mr. Plank. Very naughty indeed. But like I said, I always believe in protecting my best assets."

Gideon held the publisher's gaze, unsure whether to laugh or cry. He was tired, so very tired, and in the harsh light of morning, yesterday's act of brutal revenge lacked any of the whisky-fueled dignity which had prompted him to act as he did. Even as he slid the knife into St. James, he'd still felt that this was the right thing to do. For himself, for the fans, and most of all for all struggling less-than-perfect authors in tatty bedsits everywhere. When the panic erupted, he too had been caught up in it, thanking his lucky stars that he could run away, hidden in the churning melee of frightened, tiny people.

"Which brings us to your next book," the publisher said cheerily.

"My next one?"

"Of course, Mr. Plank. The show must go on. Unless of course you intend to use prison notepaper for your jottings."

Gideon held his head in his hands, a victim of his talent and physique. "You mean I keep on writing, or you retract my alibi?"

The publisher reached into a drawer and placed a black-and-white photo on the desk. "Let's just say James St. James was fast approaching his sell-by date anyway. I'd like you to meet your new sales assistant."

Gideon stared at the picture in sheer disbelief. "But it's you," he said, noticing how even the publisher had managed to capture the required "intellectual yet approachable" pose.

The publisher smiled. "Like I said, Mr. Plank. I've always wanted to write a bestseller." ●

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The Vista O'Shea

by Gerald Tomlinson

Mike O'Shea had been a movie fan since childhood, and like many movie fans he had a habit of quoting socko lines from remembered films. Jimmy Cagney was one of his favorite actors, and it followed naturally that when Mike, as a young man, caught his first breathtaking glimpse of the Tionega Valley from atop the so-called "Lookout Platform" on the old High Cliff Restaurant on Route 29, he shouted, "Made it, Ma! Top of the world!"

The line came from *White Heat*, from the great, fiery ending of that movie, and although Mike didn't incinerate himself the way Cagney did, he burned with a raging desire to own the High Cliff Restaurant. His wish made a certain amount of sense, too, because the restaurant had a For Sale sign in its cobwebbed front window.

Now, anyone who has driven through this area of upstate New York has passed the restaurant. Perched on the edge of a high cliff, it overlooks a broad, lush valley that the Iroquois once roamed. The valley is placid these days, but in Revolutionary times a bitter struggle for it took place.

The nearest town is Finleysburg, which in the late 1800s was a bustling rail center but today is slumberous. A river, the Tionega,

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threads its way down from the west, catching the sun and shooting up diamonds from its surface. A motorist standing near the restaurant, high above the valley, can easily imagine history and legend spread out in a gleaming tapestry below.

The O'Sheas, whose ancestors had marched with General Sullivan in the Revolutionary War, owned a number of businesses in the Buffalo-to-Rochester area. A shrewd and aggressive family, they took care of their own. Mike, a star third baseman in high school but a failed minor leaguer at the age of twenty-two, was casting about for the right business to buy and operate.

A writer of both fiction and non-fiction, Gerald Tomlinson devotes much of his time nowadays to topics of local interest in New Jersey. He has been published most recently by Rutgers University Press (see *Murder in Jersey,* 1994, a book of true crime). But for this new tale for *EQMM* he revisits some beautiful spots in upstate New York, where he once taught school. †

When he saw the boffo scenery from that lookout platform on the mountain, he knew what he wanted. He wanted what he saw. He fell in love with the place, fell in love with a dream, the dream of a classy new High Cliff Restaurant looking down on the idyllic countryside. He said so to his traveling companion.

His mother (for she was his traveling companion) pronounced herself less than impressed.

"Why do you want a run-down hash house in the boondocks?" she asked him in her solicitous, motherly way as the two of them motored away, she peeling rubber in her Packard ragtop. "It's just another greasy spoon in need of repairs. Use your coconut, Mike. Restaurants are headaches. The hired help always turns out to be more hurt than help. Take my advice, son. Forget it. There's a nice twenty-stool bar for sale in downtown Batavia. You can't go wrong with a gin mill, as your late father, bless his failed liver, used to say."

Mike, appalled at her reaction, shot back, "But you saw the scenery, Ma! The river. The green farmland. You know how I love pretty sights. The building needs a lot of work, sure, but the view—It's fantastic! There's none better. Ma, I'll fix up that eatery and herd 'em into it like ants at a picnic!"

His mother stared hard at the unreeling highway. "You might make a go of it at that," she mused, biting off a plug of her favorite chewing tobacco. "With luck and a sixteen-hour workday. A fancy restaurant. I don't know. People go for the damnedest things nowadays. You'll have to charge plenty for the chow."

"What do you say, Ma? Can I do it?"

"Okay, Mike. I'll stake you."

She proved as good as her word, slipping him the needed moola only

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ten days before she died tragically in a fall from the Dipsy-Doodle Fun Ride at the family-owned Cascade of Light Amusement Park outside of Niagara Falls.

He took possession of the High Cliff Restaurant, rebuilt it, modernized it, cantilevered its main dining room out into space, raised a bigger and higher lookout platform above its slanting roof, and with more pride than actual genius renamed it The Vista O'Shea.

The new restaurant prospered. Critics rated the food fair, the view fabulous. During the years of Eisenhower golf and Kennedy touch football, O'Shea's became the picture postcard pride of little Finleysburg. Local bigs who wanted to be seen would hie themselves off to The Vista O'Shea, get a table near the tall windows, and pensively survey the Tionega Valley while their lesser peers admired, envied, or tried to ignore them against the backdrop of amethyst mountains, emerald farms, and the looping, silver river.

Mike became sharply possessive of the scenery. That view belonged to him, all of it. He merely leased it out for a time to his paying customers. The broad, enchanting valley had been the first great vision of his life, his first great love—even greater than the movies—and he was its protector.

Speaking of love—

The second great vision in Mike's life was also a stunning sight, an enchanting redhead by the name of Kathleen Fergus. She ascended to the restaurant one autumn day while tooling over from Peekskill toward a holy-name college in western New York. She admired the sun-bathed valley, nibbled on an overpriced shrimp-salad sandwich, and studied a textbook on Greek mythology.

Mike, the maitre d', hastened not only to seat her but also to serve her. To his surprise, he found himself a shy, awkward host. Smitten, he ignored the lowland wonders entirely and focused on the topography of Kathleen Fergus. She was as lovely as Maureen O'Hara in *The Black Swan*. No, lovelier. And early autumn or no, his sap rose.

He managed to talk her into a date, despite his tangle-tongued manner, and then into an embrace, and then into bed. He persuaded her to tarry for a while at the top of the world, where they dallied, kissed, and parried. At last, long before the first snows of winter, his reason gave way to his passion, and he asked her to marry him.

Kathleen, nineteen, accepted and thus tied her destiny to this man who owned Olympus, or at least that part of it that Mike billed as "the dining room with the best view in America."

He was never shy or backward after that, not with his advertising claims, not with his wife. Mrs. O'Shea bore nine children in the next ten years, barely managing to get in a few games of tennis, a couple of movies, and a rubber or two of bridge between babies.

Mike, caught up in the day-to-day struggle of running a restaurant—it was as hard as his mother had said it would be—stayed apart from the nursery and never really got to know his children. Worse, he

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adopted a hazardous practice from the old Charlie Chan movies. Charlie Chan, you may remember, called his boys "Number One Son" and "Number Two Son" in a B-movie affectation that seemed to wow the audiences in those days.

With only two kids and a shrewd private eye like Chan for a father, that worked out all right in the movies. But in real life, with nine kids and a vague, romantic restauranteur calling the numbers, forget it. When Mike began addressing his children as "Number Three Daughter," "Number Five Son," and so on, he mixed those children up. He muddled everything.

"Number Four Daughter," he would say imperiously to an already rebellious teenager.

"I'm Deirdre," would come back the frosty reply.

That sort of snafu became more and more common as the years sped by. Then, too, the children's answers were often ambiguous, and a less trusting father might have suspected sarcasm. After all, what did Deirdre, that green-eyed little vixen, really *mean* when she said, "I'm Deirdre"? Was she his Number Four Daughter with a perverse desire to be called Deirdre? Or was Deirdre *not* his Number Four Daughter? Indeed (and Mike sometimes forgot) *was* there a Number Four Daughter? Yes, there had to be, didn't there? By the end of the Vietnam War, his numerical system, like the war itself, had turned into a hopeless quagmire. But Mike refused to abandon it.

"Number Two Son," he said one evening during the brief and troubled reign of Jimmy Carter. "I hear—"

"I'm Ted, Pop. Kev's Number Two. The body-and-fender king of Elm City. The one who restores old Chevys. I'm Number Three. I'll be a senior at Cornell this fall."

Mike went on carefully. "Sorry, Ted. But listen to me. I've just heard that Clyde Wrighthouse has inherited the Ayrshire Dairy Farm."

"So?"

"So listen. What I've got to tell you is important. It's about the family business. I think you're old enough to hear it."

"I'm listening."

"Good. You may have noticed that the Ayrshire Dairy Farm is the center of the whole scene down below us. It's three hundred and some acres of green and lovely farmland. When the mayor of Bentonville comes up here to meditate on the burdens of his office, he stares down in silent awe at the beauty of the Ayrshire Dairy Farm."

Ted looked ready to yawn.

"So?"

"So Clyde Wrighthouse now owns the Ayrshire Dairy Farm."

"You already said that, Pop."

Mike O'Shea spoke through tightened lips. "Do you pay any attention to your surroundings, son? This Clyde Wrighthouse is not exactly a charter member of the Sierra Club. He's not a man who phones the Garden Hot Line to find out how to tend his marigolds."

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"Who is he?"

"I'll tell you. Clyde Wrighthouse is the man who owns the Wrighthouse Junk and Salvage Yard on John Street in Elm City."

"Oh."

Mike concentrated on the view below them, at the nub of which lay the well-tended Ayrshire domain.

"That's a fact, son. And while it may mean nothing at all, it could mean trouble."

Ted pooh-poohed it. "I thought the Ayrshire Dairy Farm belonged to *Percy* Wrighthouse. Old Perce. A gentleman farmer. Deacon of the Finleysburg Methodist Church. A pillar of the community."

"It did. But life is fleeting, flesh is mortal, and last month Percy passed away from the galloping ague or some damn thing. He left his farm to his brother Clyde."

"The junk dealer."

"The same. I doubt if Percy really wanted to leave his farm to Clyde. They're as different as you and Terence."

"Terence?"

Mike paused for a moment. Wasn't one of his sons named Terence? He thought so, but decided to ignore the question. He went on. "They say Percy and Clyde hadn't spoken to each other in forty years. Percy's wife is dead, they had no children, and his two cousins live in Illinois. The property went to Clyde."

Ted yawned.

Mike bristled. Had this fresh-faced son of his learned so much about calculus up above Cayuga's waters that he couldn't add two and two?

"Have you seen the Wrighthouse Junk and Salvage Yard, son?"

"No."

"It's a vision of hell. It's a crime against God's green and pleasant land. All junkyards are ugly. This one is an atrocity. Can you imagine what would happen if . . . if—"

Ted said, "You sobbed, Pop. Jeez, what can I say? Maybe Clyde will sell the place to another dairy farmer. I guess we'll just have to wait and see what happens."

They waited.

They saw what happened.

It was hard to miss.

Within a week, a half-dozen gutted, rusted automobile hulks stood piled up like profane corpses along one side of the spotless white barn. Within two weeks, by careful count, twenty-seven metallic cadavers littered the landscape, making a garish mockery of the best view in America.

Mike took aspirin and Irish whiskey to ease the pain. He chased it with Harp lager. He tried to collect his thoughts, tried to decide on a course of action. He paced the dining room in off hours, grim and despairing.

Should he phone Clyde Wrighthouse and start yelling? Should he call

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on Clyde Wrighthouse and utter a few syllables of sweet reason? Should he take off the mitts and have his lawyer in Elm City bring legal action?

More loathsome, twisted cars arrived in the valley. Then came a mangled and monstrous tractor-trailer, which, for some reason, remained a unit despite its collapsed wheels and caved-in metal from hood to tailgate. The Ayrshire Dairy Farm was beginning to resemble nothing so much as an untended cemetery for wrecked autos and trucks.

Seven days passed. On the eighth day, as gray rain coursed down, matching Mike's mood, and as thunder rolled across the valley, matching his thoughts, and as bolts of lightning continued to miss what should have been the Almighty's primary target, Mike dialed Clyde Wrighthouse's number."

"Ay-yuh?"

"Mr. Wrighthouse."

"Ay-yuh."

"This is Mike O'Shea. Up on the mountain."

"Ay-yuh."

"I'm calling about those wrecks on your property. Those cars and trucks you've been bringing in."

"What about 'em?"

"I thought your salvage yard was in Elm City."

"Overflow."

"You mean your Elm City yard is full and you're bringing the wrecks out here?"

"Older ones. Not much call for Kaiser-Fraser parts, you know. Hudson, Studebaker. Stuff doesn't move."

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Wrighthouse, it's an eyesore. It's a damned disgrace. It ruins the view. It spoils everything up here on the mountain."

"Tough luck. I'm in business, O'Shea. Business ain't always pretty."

"Move the wrecks, Mr. Wrighthouse, or you'll hear from my lawyer."

Clyde shot back, mean as a junkyard dog, "I've already checked with mine, O'Shea, and I'm within my rights. This is my land. You need any parts from a used DeSoto?"

"Mr. Wrighthouse, I'm not joking."

"Me neither. I'm a junk dealer. I got auto parts to sell. You name the car, I got the parts. You want to buy, or you just in the mood to caterwaul?"

Mike studied the black holes in the mouthpiece of the phone.

"No answer, O'Shea? Okay. If you ain't buyin', I ain't talkin'."

"Mr.—"

Click.

Mike switched to an extra-strength pain reliever and grabbed a double shot of Bushmill's. His headache thundered on, unimpeded, out-

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booming the electrical storm. Mike's fury reduced all remedies to impotence.

That night the Honorable J. D. Medworthy, U.S. Representative for the Twenty-seventh Congressional District of New York, a wealthy son of Finleysburg, a local lawyer with clout, came to O'Shea's to sip vodka and tonic and ruminate on his own singular magnificence. He often came to O'Shea's. He considered himself a drawing card. As if to clinch that presumption for him tonight, the crowd was large and boisterous. Medworthy sat alone at his window table, handsome, aquiline-nosed, a veritable lone eagle of the Republic.

Mike approached him. "J. D.?"

"Hey, Mike-O! Good to see you, pal. We missed you at the door. Got your daughter Eileen as an escort, I think. How's it going these days? Grab a chair and tell us what's new."

Mike smiled thinly and sat down in a chair beside his congressman. He said nothing, but pointed toward the cancerous junkyard surrounding the Wrighthouse farm. A crumpled white Jeepster, just dragged in, caught the last rays of the sun.

Congressman Medworthy grinned. "That's Clyde Wrighthouse's place, I believe. Old Clyde, he's a regular two-ring circus these days."

"A circus, J. D.? He's a criminal."

"Hey, wait a minute, Mike. Watch your words. That's Wrighthouse land down there, and . . . well, look, I guess you know Clyde W . . . he supports the party right down the line. Flush times and bust, ever since I was a councilman. He's always backed us pretty good with those dimes and dollars. Better'n . . ." Medworthy glanced uneasily around the room, "why, hell, Mike, better'n you."

"I'll sue him," Mike whispered. "I'll sue the creep."

"Sue him? No way, pal. He'd laugh you out of court. There's no zoning restrictions on that valley land. I mean, you may like the sight of munching Holsteins better than a bunch of rusted-out cars from the fifties, but that's Clyde's land down there. Clyde's got powerful friends."

Mike groaned, "But the view, J. D."

"The view? Hey, Mike, like the old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be. When Tony Lopata built this place, back when Gehrig was in knickers, you couldn't find so much as a nick in any of the white fence rails on the flat. It was gorgeous. I admit it. But times change, nothing lasts." He slapped the table for emphasis. "You got to roll with the punches, Mike-O. This Clyde's a helluva guy. A go-getter. And you shouldn't slander his business. You should appreciate it. Hey, look at the crowd you got here tonight. You're not hurting too bad."

Mike stood up and walked stiffly away, rather like Rick in *Casablanca*. Ordinarily he liked Medworthy. J. D. patronized The Vista O'Shea without also patronizing Mike, which distinguished him from a number of other window-hogging superstars. But tonight—

Still, there was no ignoring reality. Mike got the picture, and a few days later, reluctantly, he made up his mind. He knew what he had to do.

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He dialed the number in the valley.

"Ay-yuh?"

"Mr. Wrighthouse, this is Mike O'Shea, up on the mountain. I won't beat around the bush. I want to settle this thing with you once and for all. What's your asking price for that junk on your farm? I'll buy it all, if you'll agree not to bring in any more."

A long silence. "Asking price? You mean for all the stuff down here? The whole lot?"

"Every last swinging tailpipe."

Another pause. Then, with a trace of caution, "Make an offer."

Mike was ready to make an offer. A high offer. He didn't want to haggle. It was the best way to go.

"Forty thousand dollars."

A gasp on the other end of the line. The voice turned cunning. "Forty thousand bucks?" Clyde wheezed excitedly. "Hoo-ee! Forty . . . forty . . . going once, going twice . . . do I hear fifty?"

Mike's own breath was coming in short puffs, but his course was set. "Okay, you hear it. Fifty thousand dollars. But you'll have to clear out the whole lot of it by next week. Clean up the whole mess. And don't bring in any more."

"I . . . I'll—"

Wrighthouse hung up.

The next morning, a little after ten, the scrap-iron owner of the Ayrshire Dairy Farm, wearing baggy khakis, a T-shirt, and a jaunty air of triumph, wrestled a long aluminum extension ladder into place on the side of the barn that faced O'Shea's. He scooted up the ladder like a monkey in rut, carrying a bucket of black paint and a wide brush. In bold letters on the side of the spotless white barn, he wrote "EX." That was the beginning. When the message was finished, it stated, in huge and sloppy capitals, "EXPENSIVE PROPERTY FOR SALE—BEST OFFER."

The lunch-hour diners got quite a belt out of it. Buzzing and pointing, they stood three deep at the windows. They chortled. As Wrighthouse fashioned his message, they cheered him on, merry as babes.

Mike trembled with rage. He dialed Wrighthouse again that afternoon.

"Okay. How much?"

"For the junk? Or for the whole spread?"

"The farm. Name your price."

"You name it. Best offer. You saw the sign."

"You're in the driver's seat, Wrighthouse. How much?"

"Well, let's see now. How much did that fancy hog trough of yours up there gross last year? Three million? Four?"

"That's my business."

"Ay-yuh. It sure is. And a pretty good business, too. Could be ailing now, though. Not such a red-hot view anymore, eh?" He cackled and added, "But we can take care of that."

"Just tell me what you want."

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"Seven figures. That's what I want, Mr. O'Shea. Count 'em: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven figures. That's what I'm after."

"Seven figures?" Mike howled. "Seven figures would buy the whole valley."

"Not anymore, it wouldn't."

"You're crazy."

"Nope," Wrighthouse set him straight. "Sane as a free-agent outfielder with a three-fifty batting average. Seven figures and you're in the ballpark."

"No way!" Mike screamed. "No!"

It was Wrighthouse who heard the click.

Weeks passed. Summer lapsed into autumn. Mike's hired college kid, the one he paid by the week to paddle a canoe picturesquely down the Tionega between eleven and two each day, returned to St. Bonaventure. It was just as well. There was no point in paying a kid to complement the valley scene like that while Wrighthouse went on fouling the farm with an ever-increasing collection of junk. Not just cars and trucks now, but discarded bathtubs, sinks, water heaters, air conditioners, electric fans, room radiators.

During this period, while the nation was deciding whether to put its fate in the hands of the star of *Bedtime for Bonzo*, Mike met Clyde for the first time. It happened in downtown Finleysburg. The junkyard farmer, tall, lantern-jawed, and pipestem thin, was as ugly as his acreage, with vicious little gray eyes and angry pockmarks cratering his face. Mike recognized him as the painter on the ladder, whom he had seen clearly through his pay-for-view telescope on the restaurant's lookout platform.

The business section of Finleysburg, with its single main street and false-fronted stores, had the look of a fading cowtown. Wrighthouse staggered from a saloon. The kingpin of scrap, flushed crimson, clearly had been swilling something stronger than sarsaparilla.

Clyde and Mike spotted each other at twenty paces. Swaying in the light breeze, Wrighthouse stopped, squinted, gathered his thoughts, and put them into a slurred offer: "Mr. Michael O'Shea, ain't it? The big man on the mountain. Tell you what, Mr. O'Shea. I'll give you half a million bucks for that hog trough of yours up yonder. Cash on the barrelhead. Call me anytime."

He tipped around on his heel and lurched away.

That did it.

At that precise moment, Mike O'Shea decided he'd had enough. Clyde Wrighthouse, like Carthage of old, must be destroyed. According to Medworthy, it couldn't be done within the law. All right, he'd do it outside the law.

Mike knew a man outside the law—Lennie (the Loon) Garofalo of Reedsboro. On Friday nights, after a hard week of breaking legs or whatever he did, Lennie would gun his 'vette south to The Vista O'Shea, usually with a sumptuous blonde aboard, and seldom the same

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blonde. According to J. D. Medworthy, the loud-talking but impeccably dressed Lennie Garofalo was a top lieutenant of Joe (Mr. Big) Biggadario, a dapper weasel who ran the upstate rackets from Erie County east to the Catskills. Lennie, so said J. D., oversaw Mr. Big's interests in the Tionega Valley.

At eight o'clock on Friday evening, Garofalo arrived, and O'Shea seated him personally, leading him and his undulating blond knockout, Gina, to the Loon's regular table by the window.

"Could I speak with you later, Mr. Garofalo?" O'Shea asked quietly when the couple had been seated.

"Right now," Lennie said, motioning to Gina to vacate her chair. "Check out the ladies' room, sugar."

Gina left, and O'Shea, marveling that anyone since the great Bogey could get away with a line like that, sat down self-consciously.

"Well?"

"Well," Mike began, "I guess you've noticed what's happened to the scenery in the valley."

Lennie glanced toward the darkening landscape. "Terrible," he said without emotion. "But funny, too. The farm belongs to Clyde Wrighthouse. 'Steel Jaws,' we call him. Ever see that James Bond flick with the huge guy and his metal teeth?"

"The Spy Who Loved Me. Richard Kiel. Seven foot two. You know Wrighthouse?"

"Not personally, but I hear the boys talk about him."

"He's a junk dealer."

"He makes a buck."

"I've got nothing against junk dealers, Mr. Garofalo. They're fine in their place. I just don't think their place is down below the dining room with the best view in America."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'd like to eliminate him and his junkyard from that farm down there."

"Kill him?"

"No, no, no, no. Nothing like that."

Lennie smoothed his blow-dried hair and studied the earnest face of his host. "I hope you don't think I'm a violent guy, Mike, just because I work for Joe Biggadario. I'm in business. I'm legit. Pizza."

"I know. I'm sure you are. Let me tell you what I've been thinking about. It's a practical joke, you might say. A kind of hoax."

Garofalo arched his eyebrows doubtfully.

Mike went on. "Suppose Clyde Wrighthouse wasn't just dealing in auto parts. Suppose he was using his junkyards—using those wrecked cars—to dispose of bodies. Mob bodies."

Lennie looked startled, then snapped, "He ain't." His abrupt, unfeigned surprise passed in an instant. "Who the hell told you that?"

"Nobody."

"So what are you talking about?"

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"Look, I know Wrighthouse doesn't dispose of bodies for the mob. But suppose the cops think he does. Suppose somebody has tipped them off about it. And then suppose a dead body shows up in the trunk of one of his wrecked cars down on the flat. That might give Mr. Wrighthouse some problems, don't you think? They'd close his junkyard, wouldn't they?"

Garofalo shrugged. "I didn't hear none of this," he said, looking away across the valley. "Things like that cost money. How much we talking about?"

"Whatever it takes."

Lennie continued to look toward the red-tinged twilight. A turkey vulture glided across the sky. "Any idea who this dead body should belong to?"

"No. It doesn't matter. Someone whose time is up anyway, I guess. If you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean," Lennie growled. "I don't know nothing about these things. I'm a businessman. Like you. I ain't some kind of hit man." Despite several arrests on capital charges (but no convictions so far), he acted genuinely offended. "In fact, I don't even hear you talking."

Gina reappeared, her toothpaste-ad smile uncertainly in place. "Get lost," Lennie snarled the moment he saw her. She shrank back, reddened, and retreated.

"I wish you could hear me, Mr. Garofalo," Mike insisted. "It could be worth your while."

"Yeah? We'll see. I'll send a man down from Reedsboro to talk to you in a day or two. Maybe you'll cool off by then."

"I don't think so."

Mike stood up, abashed by the daring step he had taken.

Lennie's man, Just Plain Ed, called two days later. Ed's last name was unpronounceable, he explained, and Just Plain Ed would do fine. The price was steeper than Mike expected, but it was a lot less than Wrighthouse was asking. They agreed on a plan. Half the money would be mailed immediately and in cash to a post-office box in Reedsboro. The other half would be paid the same way after Ed phoned Mike, telling him to tip off the state police that a body was stuffed in the trunk of a car in the valley.

That should put Wrighthouse on the defensive all right. Close down the pockmarked litterer. Get those madly multiplying wrecks off the landscape.

It went off without a hitch. Up to a point.

Ed's phone call came at about three o'clock the next Thursday. O'Shea slipped away from the restaurant, drove to a roadside pay phone on the outskirts of Finleysburg, dialed the state police barracks at Aaronsville, and, speaking hoarsely through his handkerchief, said, "Check the trunk of the green fifty-seven Chevy on the Wrighthouse property. River Road." He hung up.

He drove back to the restaurant and took up a nonchalant pose near the window. In less than ten minutes, a state trooper's car, lights flash-

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ing, pulled into the Wrighthouse driveway. The trooper who was driving veered off in the direction of the green Chevy and drove to within a few yards of it. Mike didn't recall seeing the Chevy down there the day before.

He watched the trunk of the car being raised. Within minutes, two more patrol cars pulled in, trailing dust. Half a dozen officers milled about. A photographer took pictures. An ambulance arrived, and a shrouded form on a stretcher departed.

The news reports should be well worth reading, Mike figured. He could see the bold headline in his mind's eye: "Police Probe Junkyard Link to Gangland Murder." That should fix the landscape-trashing Clyde Wrighthouse. Get him off the streets and highways. Close down his operation.

But it didn't happen that way. Before Mike had a chance to pour himself a second celebratory dram of Bushmill's that night, two plain-clothes state police officers, a man and a woman, appeared in the lobby of O'Shea's, stern-faced and purposeful.

Mike intercepted them. "Officers?" He made it a question, but he knew who they were, knew them by name.

"Mr. O'Shea?"

"Yes."

The burly male detective, showing his badge, said, "I'm Lieutenant Finch of the state police. Harry Finch. We've met before. This is Sergeant Mitchell. Alissa Mitchell. I think you've met her, too. We need to ask you some questions."

"Certainly."

The detective looked around. "Do you have an office where we can talk?"

O'Shea led them to his bright but windowless office near the lobby. Deirdre, who was there working on the books, glanced up. "Number Two Daughter," Mike introduced her in an offhand way. Deirdre grimaced and held up three fingers.

Mike waved her out of the room.

O'Shea stood behind his massive walnut desk, trying to look pleasant. The two officers faced him across it. Sergeant Mitchell was too pretty to be a cop, Mike thought. She looked fragile, like porcelain.

"Mr. O'Shea," Lieutenant Finch said, "we found a body a few hours ago in the trunk of a car down on River Road. We've impounded it. The man in the trunk had been murdered."

Mike nodded. "I saw some police activity, some flashing lights below the restaurant."

"The car we found the body in," the lieutenant continued, "is a green fifty-seven Chevrolet sedan."

Mike tapped his fingers on the polished desktop.

"Mr. O'Shea, your son Kevin is the owner of that car."

Kevin? One of Kevin's Chevys? Mike's eyes skipped back and forth between the accusing face of Lieutenant Finch and the wanly sympa-

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thetic face of Sergeant Mitchell. Though naturally talkative, Mike found no words on his lips.

Finch repeated his news. "The Chevy belongs to Kevin R. O'Shea. It's registered in his name."

Stunned, Mike took refuge in a flow of meaningless talk. "My son's cars aren't like the wrecks down there in the valley, Harry. Kevin restores cars. That's his job. He always owns three or four old Chevys. He fixes them up and sells them. He's good at it. He doesn't kill people."

Lieutenant Finch said, "The man we found in the trunk was stabbed with what looks like a steak knife from this restaurant. No fingerprints, but the knife has an *O'S* monogram on the handle. My partner"—he glanced toward Sergeant Mitchell—"says your restaurant uses monogrammed steak knives."

Alissa Mitchell was right, of course. Every winter Mike bought monogrammed steak knives by the gross, knowing that half of them would be carried off as souvenirs.

Mike struggled with the bizarre details of the crime. Kevin's restored '57 Chevy amidst the Wrighthouse junk. Why had Just Plain Ed stolen a car from Kevin O'Shea, of all people? And why had he, or anyone else, swiped a steak knife from The Vista O'Shea to use as the murder weapon? What was going on? Why hadn't Ed put a bullet behind the victim's ear? Wasn't that how they did it in professional circles?

Kevin's car down there on the flat made no sense. Nothing made sense. Still, Mike tried to explain away the knife.

"It's true we use monogrammed knives, Harry. We've lost hundreds of them over the years. Anyone who eats at O'Shea's can swipe a steak knife or two. Like towels in a hotel. We expect it."

"Of course," the detective said evenly. "But not everyone had a motive for this particular murder. Unfortunately, you seem to have had one. It's common knowledge, we're told, that you and the deceased were on bad terms."

What? He and the deceased on bad terms? Come on, he thought. Not me. Mike O'Shea gets along with everybody. Who *was* the deceased?

A sudden, sinking feeling gripped his stomach. The truth about this ghastly mix-up, about Wrighthouse's sideline business and Lennie's loony betrayal, struck him like a cudgel. Kevin's '57 Chevy. A monogrammed O'Shea steak knife. A victim on bad terms with Mike.

He saw the thread, the dark implications.

While Mike thought he had been outlining a hoax to Lennie Garofalo, he had accidentally presented a dead-on factual picture. He had stumbled upon the skeleton in the Wrighthouse closet. The rat-eyed kingpin of junk *was* disposing of bodies for the mob. Steel Jaws, indeed. And Mike O'Shea, naive Mike, had blunderingly suggested a hoax with that exact scenario. No wonder Garofalo had acted so startled.

But couldn't Lennie just have walked away from Mike's scheme? Maybe. But he didn't. Instead he decided to play a macabre practical joke of his own.

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"So the victim—" Mike said haltingly. "The man in the trunk—"

"Clyde Wrighthouse," the detective said. "The owner of the Wrighthouse Junk and Salvage Yard. Your son Kevin is being held at the county jail on suspicion of murder."

Mike O'Shea stared first at the lieutenant, then at the sergeant.

"You've got it wrong," he said, fighting to control his voice. "I'm the one responsible for this. Not Kevin. It was my idea."

Sergeant Mitchell, sensing a domestic tragedy of some kind, stopped him. "Maybe you'd better call your lawyer, Mr. O'Shea."

Mike sagged into the swivel chair behind his desk. He could see a bleak future opening up before him. He felt himself trapped in his own scheme. He didn't dare finger the real villains, Lennie the Loon and Just Plain Ed. It would be too dangerous to the other O'Sheas. He couldn't, wouldn't expose his family to the possible wrath of the mob. He would have to take the fall himself.

What did Marty Robbins say in that old country song?— "One window, four walls, and a door that won't open." That was what Mike foresaw. No more shining vista of purple mountains, green farms, and the winding silver river. Well, he consoled himself, he would have time to watch a lot of movies.

Sergeant Mitchell repeated her advice. Mike O'Shea, not responding, kept his head lowered. Finally, he looked up with composed determination. "Tell Ted—Number Four Son—the restaurant is his. Tell him to buy the Ayrshire Dairy Farm from the Wrighthouse estate."

Sergeant Mitchell, puzzled, studied some notes she had made on a yellow legal pad. "I have a question, Mr. O'Shea. Is it Ted you want us to tell? Or is it Sean? Sean is your fourth son, I believe. He lives in Tulsa."

Mike waved impatiently. "Ted. Tell Ted. He's at Cornell."

The sergeant moved around the desk and, in a most undetectivelike gesture, laid a comforting hand on Mike's shoulder. "You seem to have some explaining to do. You may be able to save yourself trouble by getting some legal advice. You really should."

"No," Mike said sadly. "It's all over. Gone with the wind. I'll never be able to look down on that valley in the same way again. Even after the junkyard is cleared, I'll have an image of it burned in my mind. Not to mention the memory of Clyde Wrighthouse. No. It's history. What's important now is to get Kevin out of jail. I can't abandon one of my nine kids." He thought for a moment. "Or is it ten?"

Sergeant Alissa Mitchell's expression took on the pitying look of understanding perfected over the years by actress Angela Lansbury.

Mike looked up at Detective Mitchell with a resigned half-smile.

"I know you think I'm being foolish, Alissa. Well, I've been foolish all my life. I'm not likely to change now. As for what happens to me from now on—" His reflective musings tailed off, and he finished in a world-weary voice that was a fair imitation of Clark Gable's: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." ●

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Recipe Secrets

by Joan Richter

After the real-estate agent left, Larry stood in the front doorway of the house where he and Evelyn had lived for most of their marriage and contemplated the quiet tree-lined street. His glance drifted from house to house, each on an oversized lot, beautifully landscaped, typical of suburban Philadelphia.

"I'm not sure I even want to sell," he told the woman when she first arrived. "It's only a possibility."

An accommodating smile had multiplied the wrinkles of her grandmotherly face, framed in wisps of gray hair. "I understand. Big decisions need to be taken in stages. It's hard to leave a house you've lived in for so long."

"Twenty-one years," he said with something of a sigh and hoped it didn't reach her like a pitch for sympathy.

She appeared not to notice. "This is a marvelous house and a lovely neighborhood. When you decide, you'll have no trouble selling. Could we start with the kitchen? For me that's the heart of a house."

He'd wondered if it had been that for Evelyn. No question it had been important to her, but the heart? He led the way and then stood aside as Mrs. Brody took in the last of his wife's redesigns. His reward was the woman's small gasp as her gaze traveled over black and white cabinets, marble counters, the broad sweeping length of a center island. Her eyes widened when she entered the breakfast room, where floor-to-ceiling windows gave view to a terraced garden, banked with specimen evergreens and flowers that changed with each season. It was June. Mounds of white peonies alternated with clumps of salmon-colored poppies.

"It's magnificent," she said.

Though she took a ten-year break from short story writing while she went "rocketing around the world" on a job for American Express in the 1980s, Joan Richter made a splash comeback in 1995 with a story that ranked in the top ten in the Mystery Writers of America's Golden Anniversary Short Story Contest. She is best at characterization, but her new story for *EQMM* shows that she also knows how to deliver a surprise. ¶

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Larry nodded, thinking, So were the earlier kitchens, and the other gardens. Evelyn had never been satisfied.

"The Wilsons told me your wife was a professional. I can see how important this space was to her."

It was Madge Wilson who had given him Mrs. Brody's name. "She's not pushy, and you can learn a lot from her," Madge had said and so he had given the woman a call.

"Phil and I play golf together. Evelyn and Madge were best friends."

"I understand your wife was a food and flower stylist. I'm not sure I know what that is."

"I'm not the best to explain it. Evelyn was a terrific cook and liked to fiddle with flowers. At some point she turned a hobby into a profession. She prepared food and flowers for magazine ads and TV commercials. She did things like paint a roast turkey with shellac to keep it looking shiny and crisp. Madge can tell you more."

They toured the rest of the two-story house at an efficient pace, and in less than an hour were seated in the living room going over a few details. "Have you thought where you might move?" Mrs. Brody asked.

"Something much smaller. Maybe one of the townhouses on the golf course. But I need more time. I don't know where to begin with all of this." He waved an arm, embracing the sprawling house and its contents.

"An inventory of each room will help. Decide what you can't part with, and then what you hate." She gave a sharp little laugh. "I won't bore you with how I know about that, except that my late husband collected birdcages. I got rid of every last one."

Larry felt himself grinning, not at what a house full of bird cages must have been like, but the prospective fate of the big painting in Evelyn's study, by that long-haired artist who called himself Aztek.

"When you're ready," Mrs. Brody went on, "I can recommend people who run estate sales. You give them a list of what stays and what goes. They find buyers for the bigger things. The rest they tag and sell. You don't even have to be around; in fact, it's better if you're not."

At the front door, she smiled. "It helps to start by throwing things out. The kitchen is a good place to get the feel for that—stale cereals and cookies, all those baking ingredients your wife kept on hand. . . ."

Larry stared at the enormous painting that hung on the wall in Evelyn's study. It was one of the pieces from Aztek's first show, a gift to Evelyn for doing the reception for the exhibition. Larry wondered if his prejudice against Aztek's long hair and phony name had gotten in the way of fair judgment. He shook his head. It was no more to his taste now than it had ever been. He remembered telling Evelyn she'd been shortchanged, her cocktail tidbits and flower arrangements had stolen the show. Aztek's paintings were just a joke. It had been a nasty remark. In retrospect it made him cringe.

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Fury had leapt in his wife's gray eyes. "You don't know a thing about art. Aztek is going to be big."

She turned out to be right. A gallery owner from Manhattan had come to the show and was smitten with what she saw. She took some paintings back to SoHo, where they sold at good prices. They were all from Aztek's egg period—large canvases, dominated by large ovals, with smaller ovals inside.

Larry eyed the big purple and yellow oval on the wall and moved closer to examine the crowded illustrations framed in other eggs. The worlds of activity surprised him—a picnic in the woods, a volleyball game, an outdoor cafe, a ballet class. In each of the scenes Aztek had painted himself as the dominant figure—lean, tall, darker-skinned than he really was, his hair in a long plait down his bare back.

A ripple of discomfort crept over Larry as he looked from one scene to the other and realized that the figures were caricatures of people he knew. It was a shock to find himself—at the picnic, lying on his back, asleep. Well, not everything about him was asleep. Jesus! He was naked. So what, so was everyone else—just not so prominently.

It was a bigger jolt when he found Evelyn—alongside the ballet bar with her leg raised high. He stared in stunned disbelief at the tiny strawberry mark in the crease of her inner thigh. Aztek had painted it as a rose, which is exactly what it looked like in real life, up close.

A memory slid over him like warm oil, transporting him to a hotel room overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. The sun poured in through wide-slatted plantation blinds and the shadows of palm trees traced intricate patterns on the walls, but he hardly noticed. He was too absorbed in stroking the satiny skin of the woman who lay at his side. He leaned closer to kiss the softness of her inner thigh, and saw the rose for the first time.

He stood in the shadow of Aztek's canvas, trapped in the meaning of what was there. There was only one way Aztek could have known about that tiny mark.

When the phone on Evelyn's desk rang, it was only after the third ring that he managed a croaking hello.

"Larry?" He recognized Madge's hesitant voice. "Did I wake you? It's Madge."

He shook his head, fumbling for a sensible response. "Mrs. Brody just left. She's given me a lot to think about."

"Good things, I hope. I just called to remind you about tomorrow—Sunday night supper at our house. No need to wear a tie. It'll be just the three of us." She laughed goodnaturedly, and he knew she was referring to the cocktail party she and Phil had given two weeks ago where he had been less than attentive to the two single women invited for his benefit. They were attractive enough, but he'd felt no spark. That was how it had been since Evelyn died. It was as though he'd lost interest in the game.

He brought up the issue when he went to his doctor about a pain in

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his shoulder the next week. After dealing with the shoulder and writing out a prescription for tendinitis, Hubbard settled back in his chair.

"So, your libido is a bit low . . . you're a little depressed. . . . I'm not surprised. It's not even a year since your wife died."

"Five months," Larry said, and found himself recalling the day.

He'd come back from a week-long business trip and spent the day at his office, catching up. Around lunchtime he left a message on Evelyn's machine saying he'd be home between six and seven. He suggested dinner out. Maybe Phil and Madge were free.

He hadn't expected to hear from her. She would either act on his suggestion or choose an alternative. If she had something of her own to do, he'd find a note.

It was six-thirty when he turned into the driveway and hit the garage-door opener, already savoring the idea of the scotch he'd pour himself as he turned on the news. But the thought evaporated as his attention swerved to take in the length of green garden hose trailing alongside Evelyn's car. One end was taped securely into the exhaust pipe, the other threaded through the driver's window.

"You came to see me after the funeral," he heard Hubbard say and saw the doctor eyeing him over the rims of his half-glasses. "You asked me if your wife might have been ill."

Larry nodded. "I remember. You said she was in good health. According to the police, most suicides leave a note. Evelyn didn't. I guess I was looking for a reason."

Hubbard came from around his desk and Larry knew his time was up; there were other patients waiting. He felt Hubbard put his arm around his shoulder. "You'll be okay. It just takes awhile. Any death is hard. This is one of the hardest. Keep in touch. I'm here if you need me."

At some point in his wanderings through the house, Larry decided he was hungry. It was past one o'clock. A beer and a corned beef sandwich at the Red Dog would be just the thing, with a stop at the liquor store for some empty boxes. After lunch he'd start on the kitchen cupboards.

When he reached the mini mall, a flower sale was taking up the center space and he had to park off to the side. All the flats and pots of summer blooms made him think about Evelyn's talent with flowers—amazing what she could do with a few twisted branches and a couple of blooms. Some arrangements were much more elaborate, like the ones she had made for Aztek's shows—driftwood and rocks that weren't really rocks but pottery shaped in that form, hollow and lighter in weight. Displayed on their own pedestals, her arrangements were stunning works of art. One time he asked her where she got her ideas.

"It has to do with balance and form," she said without warmth or elaboration, and he knew he had been dismissed.

He had thought a lot about their marriage since her death. He won-

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dered how they had gotten into living such parallel lives, hardly intersecting at all. From the beginning his job with the pharmaceutical firm had meant long days, spilling over into weekends. Evelyn had accommodated, seeming to find ways to keep herself entertained and occupied. Even when his travel increased, she didn't seem to mind.

He got the hang of having a good time on the road. Taking his golf clubs along had opened up things. There was that game, and the other—women. Most of them had been married, bored, looking for some fun. There was hardly a city in his territory where he hadn't found someone to fool around with. Things changed after he met Hadley. He lost interest in the others, and began thinking of spending his whole life with her, but it had never come to that.

What a sport she had been, always on time, waiting for him at the Providence airport in that sharp little red Mustang she drove with the top down when the weather was right, looking like she'd just jumped out of the shower and had tossed her hair dry. Off they'd go, headed for one of the fancy New England inns she had on her list. The syndicated travel column she wrote under a pseudonym gave her a ready excuse to take off, so that her husband, who was with a brokerage firm and worked long hours, never questioned her being away.

It lasted almost two years, and then suddenly it was over. No explanation. One day he called and heard a recording saying the number had been disconnected, no forwarding number.

He had toyed with the idea of driving by her house and just ringing the bell, or hiring someone to do the same thing, but have them pretend they were making a survey. But then what? He dropped both ideas. He had no interest in messing up her life. But the way it ended still had him wondering. It hadn't fit with Hadley's open style.

It wasn't until Sunday morning that he tackled the kitchen cupboards. He tossed out stale cookies, crackers, cereal, and whatever else looked old and tired. He filled the cartons with things the food bank could use, and set aside bars of baking chocolate and cans of nuts to give to Madge. She was a good cook, but no match for Evelyn, especially when it came to pies. No one made a pie like Evelyn. Apple, peach, cherry—the fruit almost didn't matter—it was the warm, flaky, buttery crust that melted in your mouth and made you ask for more.

Thinking about it brought on a painful recollection of the day he and Phil had finished a golf game and were sitting over beers—maybe three years ago.

"Say, Larry, Madge's birthday is next week. I'd like to give her something special—something she wants, and can't buy. What would it take for Evelyn to give me her pie recipe?"

He remembered his surprise. "What do you mean, what would it take? Just ask her."

Phil's face reddened. "Madge tried that. Evelyn refused. She says it's a family secret."

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Larry guessed he must have laughed, a shaky cover for his embarrassment. "I don't understand those kinds of secrets," he said awkwardly, wincing inside.

He found himself wondering once again how Evelyn could have done that to someone like Madge.

He finished sorting through the food cupboards and turned to the closet next to the refrigerator. It was lined with shelves, crowded with cookbooks. On the middle shelf, right out in front, was a bright blue recipe box, the kind that fit three-by-five index cards. The pie recipe still on his mind, he wondered if this was Evelyn's secret file. He reached for it eagerly and took it to the breakfast room and sat down. In the brighter light he saw the pale blue card taped to the lid. Evelyn's handwriting leapt up at him. *For Larry only—Destroy on my death. Evelyn*

He stared at the date she had written below her name. It was the day she died. He reeled back as though he had been punched.

He closed his eyes, struggling to understand. She'd left him no note of farewell, no explanation for why she had taken her life, yet she left him instructions about the disposition of her recipes. Why the hell hadn't she destroyed them herself!

Angrily, he grabbed the file. He would start with A. What would he find—Apple Pie, Apple Strudel, Apple Tart? And behind B—Brownies? And when he finally got to P? Would he find Pie Crust, a family secret . . .?

He looked at the first card and got a second jolt. A hot current of disbelief ran through him, jangling every nerve. His hands were trembling as he turned to the second card and then the third. His heart was doing strange flips as he moved through the alphabet, through the eastern seaboard cities where he had traveled over the years.

ALBANY—Cheryl
BOSTON—Judy
CHARLESTON—Darlene

His head was throbbing and his mouth was dry when he came to P.

PROVIDENCE—Hadley

He clutched the side of the table and then brought his hands up to his face and covered his eyes, but there was no blotting out what he had seen—the cities in capital letters, the women's names in lower case, and their addresses, all written in Evelyn's careful, slanted script. She had known about them all.

For a long time he sat like a child hiding behind his hands. He felt publicly disrobed.

He wouldn't have cared about all the others, but Hadley had been different. Discreet was the word they had used. They had talked it over and agreed he would never call her from his office or from home. He

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always called from a pay phone and never with a credit card. All hotel and restaurant bills he paid for in cash.

Their phone arrangement was simple, but secure. When she answered, he would say, "Mrs. Noble?" If she laughed he would know the coast was clear. Otherwise, he would hang up and call at another time.

His hands dropped from his face and he stared out into the garden. Shifting clouds had obscured the sun, bringing on a premature darkness that turned the windows into mirrors. At every angle, he faced the reflected image of his sagging shoulders.

He had no idea how many women there had been before Hadley. A few were just one-night stands, others went on for a while. He thought of the energy it had taken to court and persuade, to set things up, cover his tracks, and have everything go off without a hitch. All that, and Evelyn had known. How had she found out about Hadley?

A clock in the living room chimed. In an hour he was due at the Wilsons'. If only he could call them and say something important had come up, or that he wasn't feeling well; but he couldn't do that to them, nor would they buy it. It would only bring on questions that would be impossible to answer.

He began to wonder just how much Madge knew. He was aware that women shared confidences in the way men did not. Had Evelyn talked about his out-of-town activities? And what about Evelyn's affair with Aztek? Surely Madge must have known about that. How quickly he had accepted that as fact. Well, it was pretty plain. And it explained a lot—Evelyn's rage when he'd put down Aztek's art, the flower arrangements she designed for all his shows. Had she been in love with him, or had it just been a frolic? How long had it gone on?

He found the Wilsons where he expected they would be on a warm summer evening, settled into chairs on the patio beside their rambling stone house. Phil served drinks and Madge brought out a plate of spiced shrimp. Whenever he got together with them, which was often, Madge made a point of mentioning Evelyn, cautiously and only in passing. Sometimes he wondered whose grief she was tending, his or her own.

He had to be careful tonight. There was a lot on his mind and he wasn't sure just how much he wanted to say, if anything at all.

As she passed him the shrimp, Madge asked him about Mrs. Brody.

"She was terrific," he answered honestly, seizing the neutral topic. "Helpful, like you said. She got me started on cleaning out. She suggested I hire an estate-sales agent when I'm ready."

They discussed that for a while and then drifted on to other things—the proposed widening of a road alongside the library, the golf tournament scheduled for the fall. Just as darkness began to fall they moved inside to the screened porch where Madge had dinner ready—poached

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salmon with a dill sauce, potato salad, and fresh asparagus. They drank a lot of wine.

"I've a surprise for you two," she said when she rose to clear the table. "For dessert—I've made one of Evelyn's pies." He had been playing with the stem of his wine glass, which Phil had just refilled, and almost tipped it over. "You have Evelyn's pie recipe?" Disbelief roughened his voice.

"I'd given up trying to pry it out of her, then last year she just gave it to me, but she made me swear I wouldn't tell."

Larry forced a smile; the false promise of the blue file had been too bruising to leave him with any interest in Evelyn's recipe secrets. Yet he was glad Madge had the pie recipe. She'd wanted it for so long. Surprisingly, it made him feel a little better about Evelyn. Even so, there was a knot in his stomach when Madge appeared with the pie.

It was lightly dusted with powdered sugar, attractively centered on a fluted glass plate. He could tell from the fragrance that drifted toward him, it was warm, the way Evelyn had always served it. Madge cut generous slices for each of them, and then waited expectantly. Larry took the first forkful and felt the mingling of fruit and flaky crust spread across his tongue and slide smoothly down his throat. "Wonderful," he exclaimed with a prolonged, exaggerated sigh.

Madge laughed, a happy, affectionate trill. "Evelyn was such an artist when it came to food, I was just flabbergasted when she told me the trick."

Slowly, Larry lowered his fork. "What do you mean?"

A look of surprise arched Madge's brow. "You weren't in on Evelyn's secret?"

He shrugged, faking an indifference he didn't feel. Trick. The word bothered him. A lot of things were bothering him. "I always enjoyed the food Evelyn prepared, but I can't say I was interested in her recipes."

"It's a store-bought pie, right off the supermarket shelf. Evelyn's trick was to spread a quarter of a pound of sweet butter on the top and bake it for twenty minutes. I'd always thought it was some complicated recipe. Everyone did—a family secret."

"Jesus," he said, too embarrassed to say anything else.

Madge quickly poured coffee, and Phil, gifted in bridging awkward moments, returned to the real-estate agent's suggestion. "An estate sale is the right idea, Larry. You've got too much stuff in that house to handle alone."

"I'm sure that's what Mrs. Brody thought, though she was too polite to say. She told me her husband collected bird cages. She got rid of them after he was gone." He laughed. "You know what that made me think of? That big egg painting of Aztek's—the one he gave Evelyn. I've always hated it."

The words were out before he had time to think about where the subject might lead, but again Phil came to his rescue, or so it seemed.

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"I'd be careful with how you dispose of that," he said. "I'd advise Sotheby's or Christie's. An Aztek brings a hefty price these days."

"Oh, come on, Phil. He may be a better artist than I ever gave him credit for, but you make it sound like he's up in the stratosphere."

"Phil's right," Madge said softly. "With so many of his paintings destroyed in that fire, the few left have just skyrocketed."

Larry frowned. "What fire?"

Beside him he felt Madge take a quick breath. Across the table Phil cleared his throat.

Larry looked from one to the other, waiting. It was Phil who spoke. "Aztek was having a big show in New York—part retrospective, part new stuff. Some of his earlier paintings were on loan. He and the gallery owner were working late the night before the opening. There was an explosion and a fire."

Larry's frown deepened. How come he didn't know about this? "Was a lot destroyed?"

"Everything," Madge said softly.

Larry saw her press her lips together to keep them from trembling. He wasn't sure what to say. He was having trouble digesting it all. "Aztek must be pretty busted up—losing everything he'd worked on for so long." He paused, startled that he was actually feeling sorry for a guy who had slept with his wife and then bragged about it by painting her nude.

"It wasn't . . . just the paintings," Phil said, haltingly. "It was a pretty brutal fire. Aztek and the gallery owner were killed."

"Jesus! When did this happen? How come I didn't know?"

"You had enough on your mind," Phil said. "It was the same day Evelyn died."

He drove home slowly, mindful that he'd had too much to drink. He normally didn't go for brandy, but after the second bombshell of the evening, he let Phil pour him a hefty snifter.

He had never liked Aztek, and since that morning, he had good reason to like him less. But his death bothered him. Larry kept seeing the image of the artist's lean naked form, which dominated each of the scenes in the painting in Evelyn's room, suddenly consumed by flames. He shuddered and gripped the steering wheel to steady himself, knowing that there was something else that had him shivering—the awful coincidence of the fire happening on the same day Evelyn died.

As soon as he got home he went straight to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of ice water. He drank it slowly, as though it were some potent medicine with the power to settle his nerves. Over the rim of the glass he saw the recipe box on the table where he left it. It seemed to blink at him.

After Providence and Hadley's name he hadn't gone any further. What did it matter who Evelyn had known about? Still, he sat down

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and went to the end of the file. There were only two more white cards. The names of the women rang some distant bell, but their faces were a blur. There was a final light blue card.

NEW YORK CITY—Maria Fernandez
Spring Street—West 57th Street

He stared at the name and the two addresses, and then said the name out loud. Maria Fernandez. It had a familiar ring, the way the name of an actress or a singer might have, but he was sure he had never slept with a woman by that name. Yet Evelyn had included it in the file with all the others, set it apart, out of alphabetical order, on a different-colored card. That meant something. But what?

In the middle of the night he woke and lay wondering if Maria Fernandez could be the name of a detective Evelyn had hired. How else could she have found out about Hadley?

When morning came he stood under a hot shower and made his decision. He would take time off from work and get the house ready. The sooner he could sell it and move out the better.

He'd just finished a quick breakfast when Phil called to set up a golf game the next weekend.

"It's tempting, but I've made up my mind about the house. I'm going to sell. I've got a lot to do."

"That's great. Call me if you need any help."

"I will. By the way, thanks for dinner last night, and thank Madge for me, will you?"

"Sure, but you can do that yourself. She should be at your place in about an hour. She's on her way to buy some geraniums. You left your jacket here. She'll leave it by the front door, if you're out."

"I'll be here," he said, and then, suddenly, took a chance. "Say, Phil, you know anyone named Maria Fernandez?"

Even over the phone, he sensed Phil's surprise. "Well, I can't say I knew her. I met her a couple of times. . . ."

"Who is she?"

"She had a gallery in SoHo, the one that gave Aztek his big break. Later she opened a place in midtown. . . ."

Larry heard the slight hesitation in Phil's voice, and then the hurried rush to finish. "She was with Aztek the night of the fire—it was her gallery that burned."

He was in the garage with the door open, waiting for Madge, giving the appearance of sorting through garden tools, when she pulled into the driveway.

"Not only do I get a great dinner, now it's special delivery," he said and opened her car door, anxious not to have her hurry off.

"It was on my way," she said, handing him the jacket.

"How can I thank you . . . not for dinner last night, but for everything

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else you and Phil have done." He paused, afraid he couldn't go on. He wasn't sure he could do it, not to Madge, but there were things he needed to know. He would be careful and not push too hard. Above all, he didn't want to hurt her. No, that wasn't true. Above all, he wanted some answers.

The expression in her eyes was troubled as she stood waiting for him to go on.

"You've both been so great through all of this. I had no idea of all that you had been dealing with. It couldn't have been easy."

She nodded. "I won't pretend. Some of it wasn't."

"There was so much about Evelyn I didn't know. . . . I was in her study just a little while ago. There are albums with photographs of food she prepared for events I never knew about . . . photographs of flower arrangements, and lists of prizes she won. . . ." His voice trailed off. There was a lot more that he had seen that had set him back on his heels, but he'd said enough.

A shiver of sadness moved slowly across her face. "What can I say, Larry? It wasn't all your fault. She was my best friend, but Evelyn had a side to her I didn't understand. . . . I never understood the two of you—you were never around, and when you were you didn't seem to register anything she was doing. And she didn't seem to care." She stopped abruptly and shook her head. "I'm talking too much."

"No, you're not. You knew us both. You were Evelyn's closest friend."

Madge lowered her eyes, not quickly, but in a way that said she wanted time. When she looked up, her expression was uncertain.

"Evelyn was into so many things. Years ago she and I talked about starting a business together—a bookstore, a gift shop. They were such simple ideas. They didn't work out, but we stayed friends. It took her awhile, but eventually she found her niche."

"What was that?"

"Oh, Larry." There was a little laugh and a note of exasperation in Madge's voice. "She was a food and flower stylist. You knew that."

"Is that what she called herself?"

"That's what the advertising industry called her. It's a profession. She was good at it. She developed a lot of tricks."

There was that word again.

"Sure, I knew the basics of what she did. Some of it didn't register—as you said. Maybe a lot of things didn't, like her affair with Aztek."

Madge's chin lifted and she sent him a level gaze. "So you knew. Evelyn thought you didn't."

Evelyn had been right, he hadn't known, not until yesterday. "When did Maria Fernandez enter the picture?" He asked the question slowly, not liking himself one bit. It was the ambush question he had planned. It paid off. The expression that came to Madge's face told him there was more to Maria Fernandez than he had figured out.

"Madge, this is hard for me, but I think it's worse for you. You were Evelyn's friend. I'm sure she told you things you'd rather not have

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known. She took her life and left no explanation. I can learn to live with that if I have to, but it isn't easy."

A ripple of pain moved across Madge's brow. Tears filled her eyes. She took a breath and reached for his arm and motioned toward the gate at the side of the house. It led to the garden in back.

They settled into facing chairs. Although her composure had returned, her tears freshened as she looked around at the graceful terracing of evergreens and early summer flowers. "It's so beautiful here. Evelyn had a talent for creating beauty, but that was only one side of her. Oh, Larry, it's the side I want to remember, but it's so hard."

He waited, saying nothing, deciding it was best to give her time.

"You asked me about Maria Fernandez. . . ."

He nodded. "I'm just guessing, but I assume she and Aztek became involved with one another. Was Evelyn upset over that?"

"If it had only been that simple," Madge said in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper. Dark shadows moved across her face, a turmoil of emotions flickered in her eyes. "Evelyn knew Maria long before Aztek came on the scene. Maria was part of the New York set Evelyn got into—artsy people. It drew her like a magnet. She was up there all the time. She and Maria . . . well, they developed a relationship."

"A relationship?"

"Larry, I'm not good at this. I never understood what was between Evelyn and Maria. I think Evelyn was experimenting with things she didn't understand."

He tipped back his head and stared up at the sky. I don't believe it. I don't believe it. But he did. Some of the photographs he had found in Evelyn's study had prepared him.

"How did you put up with all of this?"

"I didn't know about Maria, not for a long time. It came later, after Evelyn told me that she and Aztek were having an affair. I thought he was weird, and I told her, but she wasn't interested in hearing any of that. At some point, Evelyn began to suspect that Maria and Aztek were spending time together, and not including her. They weren't a threesome anymore. When Evelyn found out they had moved in together, she went wild. She'd been jilted by both of them. I remember the day they told her they were in love, that they were going to be married right after Aztek's show."

Madge's eyes were dry, but there was a constant tremor in her voice. "Evelyn rallied and put up a crazy front, pretending everything was just fine, but I knew it wasn't. She set about making the most elaborate flower arrangements for Aztek's show—and for the wedding, which was to have been in the gallery, right after the opening." Her voice broke, and her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry. "Oh, Larry, I should have known. I should have done something to stop her."

Larry's heart froze.

"I should have talked to her," Madge went on in a frenzied rush. "I

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tried, but you know how she could be. She wouldn't listen. I suggested that she see someone—a therapist. I even gave her some names. But it was no use." She stopped, tears running down her cheeks, her hands clenched in her lap. She took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. "Maybe I should have told you. . . ."

Oh yeah, he thought. I would have been a big help. "Does Phil know all of this?"

She nodded. "Most of it. He says we should try to forget it. There's nothing we can do about it now. I think he's right. I'm glad you know. It will be easier when we get together now. There was always so much Phil and I had to avoid."

He couldn't remember what he did after Madge left, but later in the day he saw that there were more bags and cartons in the garage. The simple-minded task of cleaning out allowed him to keep on thinking, going over all the things he had learned in the last twenty-four hours. There was a missing piece in what he knew. Whatever it was, continued to elude him, in a way that teased, that made him think he already knew, but was afraid to admit. When it finally came, he rejected it as the product of his mind gone haywire. It was crazy to think that Evelyn had done anything to orchestrate the deaths of Aztek and Maria, but the idea, once admitted to his consciousness, wouldn't leave. The coincidence of the three deaths on the same day was too much to accept as chance. His suspicion swelled and grew into an even darker horror—that Evelyn might also have done harm to Hadley.

There were inquiries he would have to make, discreetly, so that if his suspicions had no basis, there would be no repercussions. He drew a line down the middle of a yellow pad. On one side he wrote "New York" and on the other "Providence." He listed all he'd learned from the Wilsons about the gallery fire, but when he turned to Providence his knowledge was a blank. Something had happened, he was more sure than ever before. It seemed the only explanation for Hadley's abrupt silence, her inexplicable departure from his life, without warning—the disconnected phone.

If his most extreme fears were true, any inquiry, to any authority, would send up an alarm, invigorating an investigation that had dried up or been put on hold, waiting for a break. An alert that would connect an incident in Providence to the fatal fire in New York would bring the FBI to his front door. His life would be torn apart.

He was losing courage.

Maybe he should heed what Phil had said to Madge. ". . . try to forget it. There's nothing we can do about it now."

He began to wonder why the Wilsons had kept the fire a secret from him all these months. By itself it would have been a piece of news. Withholding it gave it other meaning. What was it Madge had said? "I should have done something to stop her."

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What in God's name had Evelyn done?

He wandered through the house, as if in some forgotten corner an answer might be hidden. In the living room, he stood by the piano Evelyn had once played. He couldn't remember when she had stopped. A fringed silk shawl was draped across it now, anchored by a grouping of three large rocks. They weren't rocks, of course, but the pottery replicas Evelyn used in her flower arrangements. They had other uses. Garden shops sold them as clever hiding places for house keys. There was one in the small rock garden outside the door to Evelyn's workshop on the side of the house.

He'd forgotten all about that room. He hadn't even shown it to Mrs. Brody. She would have liked seeing where Evelyn had worked. Fluorescent lights were hung over a long worktable where she had done all her flower arranging. It was her private space, one he had not entered often, nor was he interested in exploring it now. He'd not been there since her death.

He found the key, hidden in the hollow rock, and unlocked the door. Inside, the lights flickered on, revealing a pegboard hung with a variety of wire clippers, shears, and assorted other tools. The contents of the shelves along one wall rivaled those of a hardware store—drills, saws, a blowtorch, tubes of glue, clay, spools of wire, bags of stones, marbles, and cans of paints and other things he had little knowledge of. Everything was as he remembered, orderly and without surprise, except for the flower arrangement that was centered on the worktable. It was as elaborate as any of Evelyn's he had seen. Shards of gilded wood and her signature rocks provided the background for dried flowers of subtle and exquisite color. An envelope was tucked among the foliage. His name was written in Evelyn's familiar hand.

So here was his letter. He should have known. This was the room that was most her own. This had been the heart of her house, not, as it was for Mrs. Brody, the kitchen.

He hesitated, not sure he wanted to read the message she had left, afraid it would be just another trick—as the recipe file had been, and the pie. We cheated each other, he thought; he reached for the envelope and saw that it was just a card. There was no message. His name was all she had written. But that was enough. The card was already in his hand, tripping the wire that had held it fast.

The flash of terrifying light came before the sound, before he felt himself lifted off his feet, before the heat and flames roared around him and his mind had lost its sense; time enough for the horror of the truth to reach him and make him glad for death. ●

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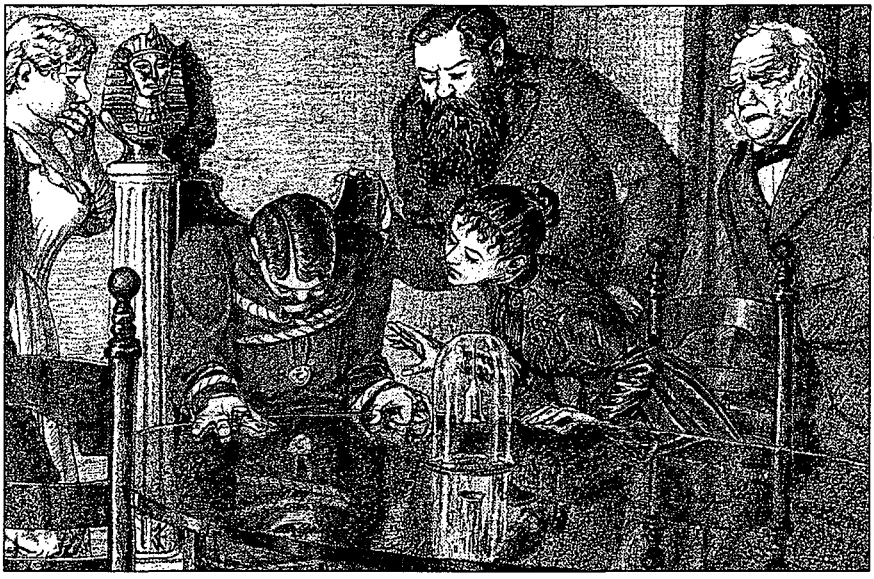

Art by Jason Eckhardt

MEDIUM RARE

by Bill Pronzini

The night was dark, cold; most of San Francisco was swaddled in a cloak of fog and low-hanging clouds that turned streetlights and house lights into ghostly smears. The bay, close by this residential district along lower Van Ness Avenue, was invisible and the foghorns that moaned on it had a lonely, lost-soul sound. Bittersharp, the wind nipped at Quincannon's cheeks, fluttered his thick piratical beard as he stepped down from the hansom. A sudden gust almost tore off his derby before he could clamp it down.

A fine night for spirits, he thought wryly. The liquid kind, to be sure—except that he had been a temperance man for several years now. And the supernatural kind, in which he believed not one whit.

He helped Sabina alight from the coach, turned to survey the house at which they were about to call. It was a modest gingerbread affair, its slender front yard enclosed by a black-iron picket fence. Rented, not purchased, as he had discovered earlier in the day. Gaslight flickered behind its lace-curtained front windows. No surprise there. Professor Vargas would have been careful to select a house that had not been wired for electricity; the sometimes spectral trembles produced by gas flame were much more suited to his purposes.

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On the gate was a discreet bronze sign whose raised letters gleamed faintly in the outspill from a nearby streetlamp. Sabina went to peer at the sign as Quincannon paid and dismissed the hack driver. When he joined her he, too, bent for a look.

UNIFIED COLLEGE OF THE ATTUNED IMPULSES

Prof. A. Vargas

Spirit Medium and Counselor

"Bah. Hogwash," Quincannon said grumpily, straightening. "How can any sane person believe in such hokum?"

"Self-deception is the most powerful kind."

He made a derisive noise in his throat, a sound Sabina had once likened to the rumbling snarl of a mastiff.

She said, "If you enter growling and wearing that ferocious glare, you'll give the game away. We're here as potential devotees, not ardent sceptics."

"Devotees of claptrap."

"John, Mr. Buckley is paying us handsomely for this evening's work. Very handsomely, if you recall."

Quincannon recalled; his scowl faded and was replaced by a smile only those who knew him well would recognize as greed-based. Money, especially in large sums, was what soothed his savage breast. In fact, it was second only in his admiration to Sabina herself.

He glanced sideways at her. She looked even more fetching than usual this evening, dressed as she was in an outfit of black silk brocade, her raven hair topped by a stylish hat trimmed in white China silk. His mouth watered. A fine figure of a woman, Sabina Carpenter. A man engaged in the time-honored profession of detective couldn't ask for a more decorous—or a more intelligent and capable—partner. He could, however, ask for more than a straightforward business arrangement and an occasional night on the town followed by a chaste handshake at her door. Not getting it, not even coming close to getting it, was his greatest defeat, his greatest frustration. Why, he had never even been inside Sabina's Russian Hill flat. . . .

"John."

"Mmm?"

"Will you please stop staring at me that way."

"What way, my dear?"

"Like a cat at a bowl of cream. We've no time for dallying; we're late as it is. Mr. Buckley and the others will be waiting to begin the seance."

Quincannon took her arm, chastely, and led her through the gate. As they mounted the front stairs, he had a clear vision of Cyrus Buckley's bank check and a clear auditory recollection of the financier's promise

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of the check's twin should they successfully debunk Professor Vargas and his Unified College of the Attuned Impulses.

Buckley was a reluctant follower of spiritualism, in deference to his wife, who believed wholeheartedly in communication with the disembodied essences of the dead and such mediumistic double-talk as "spiritual vibrations of the positive and negative forces of material and astral planes." She continually sought audiences with their daughter, Bernice, the childhood victim of diphtheria, a quest which had led them to a succession of mediums and cost her husband "a goodly sum." Professor Vargas was the latest and by far the most financially threatening of these paranormal spirit-summoners. A recent arrival in San Francisco—from Chicago, he claimed—Vargas evidently had a more clever, extensive, and convincing repertoire of "spirit wonders" than any other medium Buckley had encountered, and of course his fees were exorbitant as a result.

The Buckleys had attended one of Vargas's sittings a few days ago—a dark seance in a locked room in his rented house. The professor had ordered himself securely tied to his chair and then proceeded to invoke a dazzling array of bell-ringing, table-tipping, spirit lights, automatic writings, ectoplasmic manifestations, and other phenomena. As his finale, he announced that he was being unfettered by his friendly spirit guide and guardian, Angkar, and the rope that had bound him was heard to fly through the air just before the lights were turned up; the rope, when examined, was completely free of the more than ten knots which had been tied into it. This supernatural flimflam had so impressed Margaret Buckley that she had returned the next day without her husband's knowledge and arranged for another sitting—tonight—and a series of private audiences at which Vargas promised to establish and maintain contact with the shade of the long-gone Bernice. Mrs. Buckley, in turn and in gratitude, was prepared to place unlimited funds in the medium's eager hands. "Endow the whole damned Unified College of the Attuned Impulses," was the way Buckley put it. Nothing he'd said or done could change his wife's mind. The only thing that would, he was convinced, was a public unmasking of the professor as the knave and charlatan he surely was. Hence, his visit to the Market Street offices of Carpenter & Quincannon, Professional Detective Services.

Quincannon had no doubt he and Sabina could accomplish the task. They had both had dealings with phony psychics before, Sabina when she was with the Pinkertons in Denver and on two occasions since they had opened their joint agency here. But Cyrus Buckley wasn't half so sanguine. "You'll not have an easy time of it," he'd warned them. "Professor Vargas is a rare bird and rare birds are not easily plucked. A medium among mediums."

Medium rare, is he? Quincannon thought as he twisted the doorbell handle. Not for long. He'll not only be plucked but done to a turn before this night is over.

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The door was opened by a tiny woman of indeterminate age, dressed in a flowing ebon robe. Her skin was very white, her lips a bloody crimson in contrast; sleek brown hair was pulled tight around her head and fastened with a jeweled barette. Around her neck hung a silver amulet embossed with some sort of cabalistic design. "I am Annabelle," she said in sepulchral tones. "You are Mr. and Mrs. John Quinn?"

"We are," Quincannon said, wishing wistfully that it were true. Mr. and Mrs. John Quincannon, not Quinn. But Sabina had refused even to adopt his name for the evening's play-acting, insisting on the shortened version instead.

Annabelle took his greatcoat and Sabina's cape, hung them on a coat tree. According to Buckley, she was Professor Vargas's "psychic assistant." If she lived here with him, Quincannon mused, she was likely also his wife or mistress. Seeking communion with the afterworld did not preclude indulging in the pleasure of the earthly sphere, evidently; he had never met a medium who professed to be celibate and meant it.

"Follow me, please."

They trailed her down a murky hallway into a somewhat more brightly lighted parlor. Here they found two men dressed as Quincannon was, in broadcloth and fresh linen, and two women in long fashionable dresses; one of the men was Cyrus Buckley. But it was the room's fifth occupant who commanded immediate attention.

Even Quincannon, who was seldom impressed by physical stature, had to grudgingly admit that Professor A. Vargas was a rather imposing gent. Tall, dark-complected, with a curling black moustache and piercing, almost hypnotic eyes. Like his psychic assistant, he wore a long flowing black robe and a silver amulet. On the middle fingers of each hand were two enormous glittering rings of intricate design, both of which bore hieroglyphics similar to those which adorned the amulets.

He greeted his new guests effusively, pressing his lips to the back of Sabina's hand and then pumping Quincannon's in an iron grip. "I am Professor Vargas. Welcome, New Ones, welcome to the Unified College of the Attuned Impulses." His voice was rich, stentorian. "Mr. and Mrs. Quinn, is it not? Friends of the good Mr. Buckley? Your first sitting but I pray not your last. You are surrounded by many anxious friends in spirit-life who desire to communicate with you once you have learned more of the laws which govern their actions. Allow your impulses to attune with theirs and your spirit friends will soon identify themselves and speak with you as in earth-life. . . ."

There was more, but Quincannon shut his ears to it.

More introductions followed the medium's windy come-on. Quincannon shook hands with red-faced, muttonchopped Cyrus Buckley and his portly, gray-haired wife, Margaret; with Oliver Cobb, a prominent Oakland physician who bore a rather startling resemblance to the "literary hangman," Ambrose Bierce; and with Grace Cobb, the doctor's much younger and attractive wife. Attractive, that is, if a man preferred an overly buxom and overly rouged blonde to a svelte brunette of

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Sabina's cunning dimensions. The Cobbs, like the Buckleys, had attended the professor's previous seance.

Margaret Buckley looked upon Vargas with the rapt gaze of a supplicant in the presence of a saint. Dr. Cobb was also a true believer, judging from the look of eager anticipation he wore. The blond Mrs. Cobb seemed to find the medium fascinating as well, but the glint in her eye was much more predatory than devout. Buckley appeared ill at ease, as if he wished the evening's business was already finished; he kept casting glances at Quincannon which the detective studiously ignored.

Vargas asked Quincannon and Sabina if they would care for a refreshment—coffee, tea, perhaps a glass of sherry. They both declined. This seemed to relieve Buckley; he asked Vargas, "Isn't it about time to begin the seance?"

"Soon, Mr. Buckley. The spirits must not be hurried."

"Are they friendly tonight?" Mrs. Buckley asked. "Can you tell, dear Professor Vargas?"

"The auras are uncertain. I perceive antagonistic waves among the benign."

"Oh, Professor!"

"Do not fear," Vargas said. "Even if a malevolent spirit should cross the border, no harm will come to you or to any of us. Angkar will protect us."

"But will my Bernice's spirit be allowed through if there is a malevolent force present?"

Vargas patted her arm reassuringly. "It is my belief that she will, though I cannot be certain until the veil has been lifted. Have faith, dear Mrs. Buckley."

Sabina asked him, "Isn't there anything you can do to prevent a malevolent spirit from crossing over?"

"Alas, no. I am merely a teacher of the light and truth of theocratic unity, merely an operator between the Beyond and this mortal sphere."

Merely a purveyor of pap, Quincannon thought.

Grace Cobb touched Vargas's sleeve; her fingers lingered almost caressingly. "We have faith in you, Professor."

"In Angkar, dear lady," Vargas told her, but his fingers caressed hers in return and the look he bestowed upon her had a smouldering quality—the same sort of cat-at-cream look, Quincannon thought, that Sabina had accused him earlier of directing at her. "Place your faith in Angkar and the spirit world."

Quincannon asked him, "Angkar is your spirit guide and guardian angel?"

"Yes. He lived more than a thousand years past and his spirit has ascended to one of the highest planes in the Afterworld."

"A Hindu, was he?"

Vargas seemed mildly offended. "Not at all, my dear sir. Angkar was an Egyptian nobleman in the court of Nebuchadnezzar."

Quincannon managed to refrain from pointing out that Nebuchadnez-

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zar was not an Egyptian but the king of Babylon and conqueror of Jerusalem some six centuries B.C. Not that any real harm would have been done if he had mentioned the fact; Vargas would have covered by claiming he had meant Nefertiti or some such. None of the others, except Sabina perhaps, seemed to notice the error.

Sabina said, "Those rings are most impressive, Professor. Are they Egyptian?"

"This one is." Vargas presented his left hand. "An Egyptian Signet and Seal Talisman Ring, made from virgin gold. It preserves its wearer against ill luck and wicked influences." He offered his right hand. "This is the Ring of King Solomon. Its Chaldaic inscription stands as a reminder to the wearer that no matter what his troubles may be, they shall soon be gone. The inscription—here—translates as 'This shall also pass.'"

"Oh, Professor Vargas," Mrs. Buckley gushed, "you're so knowledgeable, so wise in so many ways."

Quincannon's dinner stirred ominously under his breastbone.

He was spared further discomfort, at least for the present, by the entrance of the psychic assistant, Annabelle. She announced, "All is in readiness, Professor," and without waiting for a response, glided out again.

"Good ladies and gentlemen," Vargas said, "before we enter the spirit room may I accept your most kind and welcome donations to the Unified College of the Attuned Impulses, so that we may continue in our humble efforts to bring the psychic and material planes into closer harmony?"

Quincannon paid for himself and Sabina—the outrageous "New Ones" donation of fifty dollars each. If he had not been assured of reimbursement from their client, he would have been much more grudging than he was in handing over the greenbacks. Buckley was tight-lipped as he paid, and sweat oiled his neck and the lower of his two chins; the look he gave Quincannon was a mute plea not to botch the job he and Sabina had been hired to do. Only Dr. Cobb ponied up with what appeared to be genuine enthusiasm.

The medium casually dropped the wad of bills onto a table, as if money mattered not in the slightest to him personally, and led them out of the parlor, down the gloomy hallway, and then into a large chamber at the rear. The "spirit room" contained quite a few more accoutrements than the parlor, of greater variety and a more unusual nature. The floor was covered by a thick Oriental carpet of dark blue and black design. Curtains made of the same ebon material as the professor's and Annabelle's robes blotted the windows, and the gaslight had been turned low enough so that shadows crouched in all four corners. The overheated air was permeated with the smell of incense; Quincannon, who hated the stuff, immediately began to breathe through his mouth. The incense came from a burner on the mantel of a small fireplace—a horsey-looking bronze monstrosity with tusks as well as equine teeth and a shaggy mane and beard.

The room's centerpiece was an oval, highly polished table around

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which six straight-backed chairs were arranged; a seventh chair, larger than the others, with a high seat and arms raised on a level with that of the tabletop, was placed at the head. Along the walls were a short, narrow sideboard of Oriental design, made of teak, with an intricately inlayed center top; a tall-backed rococo love seat; and an alabaster pedestal atop which sat a hideous bronze statue of an Egyptian male in full headdress—a representation, evidently, of the mythical Angkar. In the middle of the table was a clear-glass jar, a tiny silver bell suspended inside. On the sideboard were a silver tray containing several bottles of various sizes and shapes, a tambourine, and a stack of children's school slates with black wooden frames. Propped against the wall nearby was an ordinary-looking three-stringed guitar. And on the high seat of the armchair lay a coil of sturdy rope Quincannon estimated as some three yards in length.

When the sitters were all inside and loosely grouped near the table, Vargas closed the door, produced a large brass key from a pocket in his robe, and proceeded with a flourish to turn the key in the latch. After which he brought the key to the sideboard and set it beside the tray in plain sight. While this was being done, Quincannon eased over in front of the door and tested it behind his back to determine if it was in fact locked. It was.

Still at the sideboard, Vargas announced that before they formed the "mystic circle" two final preparations were necessary. Would one of the good believers be so kind as to assist him in the first of these? Quincannon stepped forward just ahead of Dr. Cobb.

The medium said, "Mr. Quinn, will you kindly examine each of the slates you see before you and tell us if they are as they seem—ordinary writing slates?"

Quincannon examined them more carefully than any of the devotees would have. "Quite ordinary," he said.

"Select two, if you please, write your name on each with this slate pencil, and then place them together and tie them securely with your handkerchief."

When Quincannon had complied, Vargas took the bound slates and placed them in the middle of the stack. "If the spirits are willing," he said, "a message will be left for you beneath the signatures. Perhaps from a loved one who has passed beyond the pale, perhaps from a friendly spirit who may be in tune with your particular psychic impulses. Discarnate forces are never predictable, you understand."

Quincannon nodded and smiled with his teeth.

"We may now be seated and form the mystic circle."

When each of the sitters had selected and was standing behind a chair, Sabina to the medium's immediate left and Quincannon directly across from him, both by prearrangement, Vargas again called for a volunteer. This time it was Dr. Cobb who stepped up first. Vargas handed him the coiled rope and seated himself in the high chair, his forearms flat on the chair arms with only his wrists and hands extended beyond

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the edges. He then instructed Cobb to bind him securely—arms, legs, and chest—to the chair, using as many knots as possible. Quincannon watched closely as this was done. He caught Sabina's eye when the doctor finished; she dipped her chin to acknowledge that she too had spotted the gaff in this phase of the professor's game.

Cobb, with Buckley's help, moved Vargas's chair closer to the table, so that his hands and wrists rested on the surface. Smiling, the medium asked the others to take their seats. As Quincannon sat down he bumped against the table, then reached down to feel one of its legs. As he'd expected, the table was much less heavy than it appeared to be at a glance. He stretched out a leg and with the toe of his shoe explored the carpet. The floor beneath seemed to be solid, but the nap was thick enough so that he couldn't be certain.

Vargas instructed everyone to spread their hands, the fingers of the left to grasp the wrist of the person on that side; thus one hand of each person was holding and the other was being held. "Once we begin," he said, "attempt to empty your minds of all thought, to keep them as blank as the table's surface throughout. And remember, you must not move either hands or feet during the seance—you must not under any circumstances break the mystic circle. To do so could have grave consequences. There have been instances where inattention and disobedience have been fatal to sensitives such as myself."

The professor closed his eyes, let his chin lower slowly to his chest. After a few seconds he commenced a whispering chant, a mixture of English and simulated Egyptian in which he called for the door to the spirit world to open and the shades of the departed to pass through and reveal their presence. While this was going on, the lights began to dim as if in phantasmical response to Vargas's exhortations. The phenomenon elicited a shivery gasp from Margaret Buckley, but Quincannon was unimpressed. Gaslight in one room was easily controlled from another—in this case by the assistant, Annabelle, at a prearranged time or on some sort of signal.

The shadows congealed until the room was in utter darkness. Vargas's chanting ceased abruptly; the silence deepened as it lengthened. Long minutes passed with no sounds except for the somewhat asthmatic breathing of Cyrus Buckley, the rustle of a dress or shuffle of a foot on the carpet. A palpable tension began to build. Sweat formed on Quincannon's face, not from any tension but from the overheated air. He was not a man given to fancies, but he was forced to admit that there was an eerie quality to sitting in total blackness this way, waiting for something to happen. Spiritualist mediums counted on this reaction, of course. The more keyed up their dupes became, the more eager they were to believe in the incredible things they were about to witness; and the more eager they were, the more easily they could be fooled by their own senses.

Someone coughed, a sudden sharp sound that made even Quincannon twitch involuntarily. He thought the cough had come from Vargas, but

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in such stifling darkness you couldn't he certain of the direction of any sound. Even when the medium spoke again, the words might have come from anywhere in the room.

"Angkar is with us. I feel his presence."

On Quincannon's left, Dr. Cobb stirred and their knees bumped together; Mrs. Buckley, on his right, brought forth another of her shivery gasps.

"Will you speak to us tonight, Angkar? Will you answer our questions in the language of the dead and guide us among your fellow spirits? Please grant our humble request. Please answer yes."

The silver bell inside the jar rang once, muted but clear.

"Angkar has consented. He will speak, he will lead us. He will ring the bell once for yes to each question he is asked, twice for no, for that is the language of the dead. Will someone ask him a question? Doctor Cobb?"

"I will," Cobb's voice answered. "Angkar, is my brother Philip well and happy on the Other Side?"

The bell tinkled once.

"Will he appear to us in his spirit form?"

Yes.

"Will it be tonight?"

Silence.

Vargas said, "Angkar is unable to answer that question yet. Please ask another."

There was a good deal more of this, with questions from Cobb, his wife, and Mrs. Buckley. Then Vargas called on Sabina to ask the spirit guide a question.

She obliged by saying, "Angkar, tell me please, is my little boy John with you? He was always such a bad little boy that I fear for his poor troubled soul."

Yes, he is one of us.

No, he is not here tonight.

"Has he learned humility and common sense, two qualities which he lacked on this earthly sphere?"

Yes.

"And has he learned to take no for an answer?"

Yes.

Quincannon scowled in the darkness. Although Sabina had been married once, she had no children. The "little boy John" was her doting partner, of course. Having a bit of teasing fun at his expense while at the same time establishing proof of Vargas's deceit.

"Mr. Quinn?" the professor said. "Will you ask Angkar a question?"

He might not have responded as he did if the heat and the sickly sweet incense hadn't given him a headache. But his head throbbed, and Sabina's playfulness rankled, and the words were out of his mouth before he could bite them back. "Oh yes, indeed," he said. "Angkar, will my dear wife ever consent to share my cold and lonely bed?"

Shocked murmurs, a muffled choking sound that might have come

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from Sabina, rose around him. The bell was silent. And then, without warning, the table seemed to stir and tremble beneath Quincannon's outstretched hands. Its smooth surface rippled; a faint creak sounded from somewhere underneath. In the next instant the table tilted sideways, turned and rocked and wobbled as if it had been injected with a life of its own. The agitated movements continued for several seconds, stopped altogether—and then the table lifted completely off the floor, seemed to float in the air for another two or three heartbeats before finally thudding back onto the carpet. Throughout all of this, the silver bell inside the jar remained conspicuously silent.

"Mr. Quinn, you have angered Angkar." The medium's voice was sharply reproachful. "He finds your question inappropriate, frivolous, even mocking. He may deny us further communication and return to the Afterworld."

Mrs. Buckley cried, "Oh no, please, he mustn't go!"

Cobb said angrily, "Damn your eyes, Quinn—"

"Silence!" Vargas, in a sibilant whisper. "We must do nothing more to disturb the spirits or the consequences may be dire. Do not move or speak. Do not break the circle."

The stuffy blackness closed down again. It was an effort for Quincannon to hold still. He regretted his question, though not because of any effect on Angkar and his discarnate legion; he was sure that the table-tipping and levitation would have taken place in any event. His regret was that he had allowed Sabina to glimpse the depth of his frustration, and into the bargain added weight to her already erroneous idea of the nature of his passion. Seduction wasn't his game; his affection for her was genuine, abiding. Hell and damn! Now it might take him days, even weeks, to undo the damage done by his profligate tongue—

A sound burst the heavy stillness, a jingling that was not of the silver bell in the jar. The tambourine that had been on the sideboard. Its jingling continued, steady, almost musical in an eerily discordant way.

Vargas's whisper was fervent. "Angkar is still present. He has forgiven Mr. Quinn, permitted us one more chance to communicate with the spirits he has brought with him."

Mrs. Buckley: "Praise Angkar! Praise the spirits!"

The shaking of the tambourine ended. And all at once a ghostly light, pale and vaporous, appeared at a distance overhead, hovered, and then commenced a swirling motion that created faint luminous streaks on the wall of dead black. One of the sitters made an ecstatic throat noise. The swirls slowed, the light stilled again for a moment; then it began to rise until it seemed to hover just below the ceiling, and at last it faded away entirely. Other lights, mere pinpricks, flicked on and off, moving this way and that as if a handful of fireflies had been released in the room.

A thin, moaning wail erupted.

The pinpricks of light vanished.

Quincannon, listening intently, heard a faint ratchety noise followed by a strumming chord. The vaporous light reappeared, now in a differ-

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ent location closer to the floor; at the edge of its glow the guitar could be seen to leap into the air, to gyrate this way and that with no hand upon it. The strumming chord replayed and was joined by others—strange music that sounded and yet did not sound as though it were being made by the strings.

For three, four, five seconds the guitar continued its levitating dance, seemingly playing a tune upon itself. Then the glow once more faded, and when it was gone the music ceased and the guitar twanged to rest on the carpet.

Nearly a minute passed in electric silence.

Grace Cobb shrieked, "A hand! I felt a hand brush against my cheek!"

Vargas warned, "Do not move, do not break the circle."

Something touched Quincannon's neck, a velvety caress that lifted the short hairs there and bristled them like a cat's fur. If the fingers—they felt exactly like cold, lifeless fingers—had lingered he would have ignored the professor's remonstration and made an attempt to grab and hold onto them. But the hand or whatever it was slid away almost immediately.

Moments later it materialized long enough for it to be identifiable as just that—a disembodied hand. Then it was gone as if it had never been there at all.

Another period of silence.

The unearthly moan again.

And a glowing face appeared, as disembodied as the hand, above where Dr. Cobb sat.

The face was a man's, shrouded as if in a kind of whitish drapery that ran right around it and was cut off at a straight line on the lower part. The eyes were enormous black-rimmed holes. The mouth moved, formed words in a deep-throated rumble.

"Oliver? It's Philip, Oliver."

"Philip! I'm so glad you've come at long last." Cobb's words were choked with feeling. "Are you well?"

"I am well. But I cannot stay long. The Auras have allowed me to make contact but now I must return."

"Yes . . . yes, I understand."

"I will come again. For a longer visit next time, Oliver. Next time . . ."

The face was swallowed by darkness.

More minutes crept away. Quincannon couldn't tell how many; he had lost all sense of time and space in the suffocating dark.

A second phantomlike countenance materialized, this one high above Margaret Buckley's chair. It was shimmery, indistinct behind a hazy substance like a luminous veil. The words that issued from it were an otherworldly, childlike quaver—the voice of a little girl.

"Mommy? Is that you, Mommy?"

"Oh, thank God! Bernice!" Margaret Buckley's cry was rapturous. "Cyrus, it's our darling Bernice!"

Her husband made no response.

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"I love you, Mommy. Do you love me?"

"Oh yes! Bernice, dearest, I prayed and prayed you'd come. Are you happy in the Afterworld? Tell Mommy."

"Yes, I'm very happy. But I must go back now."

"No, not so soon! Bernice, wait—"

"Will you come again, Mommy? Promise me you'll come again. Then the Auras will let me come too."

"I'll come, darling, I promise!"

The radiant image vanished.

Mrs. Buckley began to weep softly.

Quincannon was fed up with this hokum. Good and angry, too. It was despicable enough for fake mediums to dupe the gullible, but when they resorted to the exploitation of a middle-aged woman's yearning for her long-dead child the game became intolerable. The sooner he and Sabina put a finish to it, the better for all concerned. If there was even one more materialization . . .

There wasn't. He heard scratchings, the unmistakable sound of the slate pencil writing on a slate. This was followed by yet another protracted silence, broken only by the faintest of scraping and clicking sounds that Quincannon couldn't identify.

Vargas said abruptly, "The spirits have grown restless. All except Angkar are returning now to the land beyond the Border. Angkar will leave too, but first he will free me from my bonds, just as one day we will all be freed from our mortal ties—"

The last word was chopped off in a meaty smacking noise and an explosive grunt of pain. Another smack, a gurgling moan. Sabina called out in alarm, "John! Something's happened to Vargas!" Other voices rose in frightened confusion. Quincannon pushed up from the table, fumbling in his pocket for a lucifer. His thumbnail scratched it alight.

In the smoky flare he saw the others scrambling to their feet around the table, all except Professor Vargas. The medium, still roped to his chair, was slumped forward with his chin on his chest, unmoving. Quincannon kicked his own chair out of the way, carried the lucifer across to the nearest wall sconce. The gas was off; he turned it, and applied the flame. Flickery light burst forth, chasing shadows back into the room's corners.

Outside in the hallway, hands began to beat on the door panel. Annabelle's voice rose shrilly: "Let me in! I heard a cry . . . let me in!"

"Dear Lord, he's been stabbed!"

The exclamation came from Cyrus Buckley. There were other cries overriden by a shriek from Mrs. Buckley; Quincannon turned in time to see her swoon in her husband's arms. He ran to where Sabina stood staring down at the medium's slumped body.

Stabbed, for a fact. The weapon, a dagger whose ornate hilt bore a series of hieroglyphics, jutted from the back of his neck. Another wound, the first one struck for it still oozed blood, showed through a rent in Vargas's robe lower down, between the shoulder blades.

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Ashen-faced, Dr. Cobb bent to feel for a pulse in the professor's neck. He shook his head and said, "Expired," a few moments later.

"It isn't possible," his wife whispered. "How could he have been stabbed?"

Buckley had lowered his wife onto one of the chairs and was fanning her flushed face with his hand. He said shakily, "How—and by whom?"

Quincannon caught Sabina's eye. She wagged her head to tell him she didn't know, or couldn't be sure, what had happened in those last few seconds of darkness.

The psychic assistant, Annabelle, was still beating on the door, clamoring for admittance. Quincannon went to the sideboard. The brass key lay where Vargas had set it down before the seance began; he used it to unlock the door. Annabelle rushed in from the dark hallway, her eyes wide and fearful. She gave a little moan when she saw Vargas and ran to his side, knelt to peer into his dead face.

When she straightened again her own face was as white as milk. She said tremulously, "One of you did this?"

"No," Dr. Cobb told her. "It couldn't have been one of us. No one broke the circle until after the professor was stabbed."

"Then . . . it was the spirits."

"He did perceive antagonistic waves tonight. But why would a malevolent spirit—?"

"He made all the Auras angry. I warned him but he didn't listen."

Sabina said, "How did he make the Auras angry, Annabelle?"

The woman shuddered and shook her head. Then her eyes shifted into a long stare across the room. "The slates," she said.

"What about the slates?"

"Did the spirits leave a message? Have you looked?"

Quincannon swung around to the sideboard; the others, except for Margaret Buckley, crowded close behind him. The tied slates were in the center of the stack where Vargas had placed them. He pulled those two out, undid the knot in his handkerchief, parted them for his eyes and the eyes of the others.

Murmurs and a mildly blasphemous exclamation from Buckley.

In a ghostlike hand beneath the "John Quinn" signatures on each, one message upside down and backwards as if it were a mirror image of the other, was written: I Angkar destroyed the evil one.

"Angkar!" Dr. Cobb said. "Why would the professor's guide and guardian turn on him that way?"

"The spirits are not mocked," Annabelle said. "They know evil when it is done in their name and guardian becomes avenger."

"Madam, what are you saying?"

"I warned him," she said again. "He would not listen and now he has paid the price. His torment will continue on the Other Side, until his essence has been cleansed of wickedness."

Quincannon said, "Enough talk and speculation," in authoritarian

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tones that swiveled all heads in his direction. "There'll be time for that later. Now there's work to be done."

"Quite right," Cobb agreed. "The police—"

"Not the police, Doctor. Not yet."

"Here, Quinn, who are you to take charge?"

"The name isn't Quinn, it's Quincannon. John Quincannon. Of Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services."

Cobb gaped at him. "A detective? You?"

"Two detectives." He gestured to Sabina. "My partner, Mrs. Carpenter."

"A woman?" Grace Cobb said. She sounded as shocked as if Sabina had been revealed as a soiled dove.

Sabina, testily: "And why not, pray tell?"

Dr. Cobb: "Who hired you? Who brought you here under false pretenses?"

Quincannon and Sabina both looked at Buckley. To his credit, the financier wasted no time in admitting he was their client.

"You, Cyrus?" Margaret Buckley had revived and was regarding them dazedly. "I don't understand. Why would you engage detectives?"

Before her husband could reply, Quincannon said, "Mr. Buckley will explain in the parlor. Be so good, all of you, as to go there and wait."

"For what?" Cobb demanded.

"For Mrs. Carpenter and me to do what no other detective, police officer, or private citizen can do half so well." False modesty was not one of Quincannon's character flaws, despite Sabina's occasional attempts to convince him otherwise. "Solve a baffling crime."

No one protested, although Dr. Cobb wore an expression of disapproval and Annabelle said, "What good are earthly detectives when it is the spirits who have taken vengeance?" as they left the room. Within a minute Quincannon and Sabina were alone with the dead man.

Quincannon turned the key in the lock to ensure their privacy. He said then, "Well, my dear, a pretty puzzle, eh?"

Instead of answering, Sabina fetched him a stinging slap that rattled his eyelids. "That," she said, "is for the rude remark about sharing your bed."

For once, he was speechless. He might have argued that she had precipitated the remark with her own sly comments, but this was neither the time nor the place. Besides, he could not recall ever having won an argument with Sabina over anything of consequence. There had been numerous draws, yes, but never a clear-cut victory. At times he felt downright impotent in her presence. Impotent in the figurative sense of the word, of course.

"Now then," she said briskly, "shall we see if we can make good on your boast?"

They proceeded first to extinguish the incense burner and to open a window so that cold night air could refresh the room, and then with an examination of the walls, fireplace, and floor. All were solid; there were no secret openings, crawlspaces, hidey holes, or trapdoors. Quincannon

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then went to inspect the corpse, while Sabina examined the jar-encased bell on the table.

The first thing he noticed was that although the rope still bound Professor Vargas to his chair, it was somewhat loose across forearms and sternum. When he lifted the limp left hand he found that it had been freed of the bonds. Vargas's right foot had also been freed. Confirmation of his suspicions in both cases. He had also more or less expected his next discovery, the two items concealed inside the sleeve of the medium's robe.

He was studying the items when Sabina said, "Just as I thought. The jar was fastened to the table with gum adhesive."

"Can you pry it loose?"

"I already have. The clapper on the bell—"

"—is either missing or frozen. Eh?"

"Frozen. Vargas used another bell to produce his spirit rings, obviously."

"This one." Quincannon held up the tiny handbell with its gauze-muffled clapper. "Made and struck so as to produce a hollow ring, as if it were coming from the bell inside the jar. The directionless quality of sounds in total darkness, and the power of suggestion, completed the deception."

"What else have you got there?"

He showed her the second item from Vargas's sleeve.

"A reaching rod," she said. "Mmm, yes."

Quincannon said, "His left hand was holding yours on the table. Could you tell when he freed it?"

"No, and I was waiting for just that. I think he may have done it when he coughed. You recall?"

"I do."

"He was really quite cunning," Sabina said. "A charlatan among charlatans, to paraphrase Mr. Buckley."

Medium rare, Quincannon thought again, and now medium dead. Plucked and done to a turn, for a fact, though not at all in the way anticipated. "Have you a suggestion as to who stabbed him?"

"None yet, except that it wasn't Angkar or any other supernatural agency. Annabelle may believe in spirits who wield daggers, but I don't."

"Nor I."

"One of the others at the table. A person clever enough to break the circle in the same way Vargas did and then to stand up, commit the deed, and return to his chair—all in utter darkness."

"Doesn't seem possible, does it?"

"No more impossible than any of the other humbug we witnessed tonight. We've encountered such enigmas before, John."

"Too often for my liking. Well, we already have some of the answers to the evening's queer show. Find the rest and we'll solve the riddle of Vargas's death as well."

One of the missing answers came from an examination of the professor's mystic rings. The one on his left hand that he had referred to as

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an Egyptian Signet and Seal Talisman Ring had a hidden fingernail catch; when it was flipped, the entire top hinged upward to reveal a small sturdy hook within. Quincannon had no doubt that were he to get down on all fours and peer under the table where the medium sat, he would find a tiny metal eye screwed to the wood.

The miraculous self-playing guitar, which of course was nothing of the kind, drew him next. He already knew how its dancing levitation had been managed; a close scrutiny of the instrument revealed the rest of the gaff.

"John, look at this."

Sabina was at the sideboard, fingering a small bottle. When he'd set the guitar down and joined her he saw that she had removed the bottle's glass stopper. "This was among the others on the tray," she told him, and held it up for him to sniff its contents.

"Ah," he said. "Almond oil."

"Mixed with white phosphorous, surely."

He nodded. "The contents of the other bottles?"

"Liquor and incense oils. Nothing more than window dressing."

Quincannon stood looking at the sideboard. At length he knelt and ran his hands over its smooth front, its fancily inlayed center top. There seemed to be neither doors nor a way to lift open the top, as if the sideboard might be a sealed wooden box. This proved not to be the case, however. It took him several minutes to locate the secret spring catch, cleverly concealed as it was among the dark-squared inlays. As soon as he pressed it, the catch released noiselessly and the entire top slid up and back on oiled hinges.

The interior was a narrow, hollow space—a box, in fact, that seemed more like a child's toy chest than a sideboard. A clutch of items were pushed into one corner. Quincannon lifted them out one by one.

A yard or two of white silk.

Another yard of fine white netting, so fine that it could be wadded into a ball no larger than a walnut.

A two-foot-square piece of black cloth.

A small container of safety matches.

A theatrical mask.

And a pair of rubber gloves almost but not quite identical, both of which had been stuffed with cotton and dipped in melted paraffin.

He returned each item to the sideboard, finally closed the lid. He said with satisfaction, "That leaves only the writing on the slates. And we know now how that was done, don't we, my dear?"

"And how Professor Vargas was murdered."

"And by whom."

They smiled at each other. Smiles that gleamed wolfishly in the trembling gaslight.

Neither the Buckleys nor the Cobbs took kindly to being ushered back into the seance room, even though Quincannon had moved both Var-

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gas's body and chair away from the table and draped them with a cloth Sabina had found in another room. There was some grumbling when he asked them to assume their former positions around the table, but they all complied. A seventh chair had been added at Vargas's place; he invited Annabelle to sit there. She, too, complied, maintaining a stoic silence.

Buckley asked, "Will this take long, Quincannon? My wife has borne the worst of this ordeal. She isn't well."

"Not long, Mr. Buckley, I assure you."

"Is it absolutely necessary for us to be in here?"

"It is." Quincannon looked around at the others. "We have nothing to fear from the dead, past or present. The spirits were not responsible for what took place here tonight. Not any of it."

Grace Cobb: "Are you saying one of us stabbed Professor Vargas?"

Annabelle: "No. It was Angkar. You mustn't deny the spirits. The penalties—"

"A pox on the penalties," Quincannon said. "Professor Vargas was murdered by a living, flesh-and-blood individual."

Dr. Cobb: "Who? If you're so all-fired certain it was one of us, name him."

"Perhaps it was you, Doctor."

"See here—! What motive could I possibly have?"

"Any one of several. Such as a discovery prior to tonight that Vargas was a fake—"

"A fake !"

"—and you were so enraged by his duplicity that you determined to put a stop to it once and for all."

"Preposterous."

Quincannon was enjoying himself now. Dramatic situations appealed to his nature; he was, as Sabina had more than once pointed out, a bit of a ham. He turned his gaze on Grace Cobb. "Or you, Mrs. Cobb. Perhaps you're the guilty party."

She regarded him haughtily. "If that is an accusation—"

"Not at all. Merely a suggestion of possibility, of hidden motives of your own." Such as an interest in the medium that had gone beyond the spiritual and ended in a spurned lover's—or even a blackmail victim's—murderous rage.

"Or it could be you, Mr. Buckley, and your hiring of Carpenter and Quincannon but a smokescreen to hide your lethal intentions for this evening."

The financier's eyes glittered with anger. Sabina said warningly, "That'll do, John."

"It had better do," Buckley said, "if you entertain any hope of receiving the balance of your fee. You know full well neither I nor my wife ended that scoundrel's life."

Dr. Cobb: "I don't see how it could have been any of us. We were all seated here—all except Annabelle, and she was on the other side of the locked door. And none of us broke the circle."

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"Are you certain of that, Doctor?" Quincannon asked.

"Of course I'm certain."

"But you're wrong. Vargas himself broke it."

"That's impossible."

"Not at all. Neither impossible nor difficult to manage."

"Why would he do such a thing? For a medium to break the mystic circle is to risk the wrath of the spirits, endanger his own life. He told us so himself."

"He had already incurred the wrath of the Auras," Annabelle said fervidly. "It was Angkar, I tell you. Angkar who plunged the dagger into his body—"

Quincannon ignored her. He said to no one in particular, "You don't seem to have grasped my words to you a minute ago. Professor Vargas was a fake. The Unified College of the Attuned Impulses is a fake. He was no more sensitive to the spirit world than you or I or President Cleveland."

"That . . . that can't be true!" Margaret Buckley's face was strained, her eyes feverish. "Everything we saw and heard tonight . . . the visitations . . . my daughter . . ."

"Sham and illusion, the lot of it," Sabina said gently. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Buckley."

"But . . . but how . . ."

"We'll explain," Quincannon told her, "all of Vargas's tricks during the seance. To begin with, the way in which he freed his left hand while seeming to maintain an unbroken clasp of hands.

"The essence of that trick lies in the fact that the hand consists of both a wrist and fingers and the wrist is able to bend in different directions. The fingers of Vargas's left hand, you remember, were holding Mrs. Carpenter's wrist, while Mrs. Cobb's fingers were gripping his right wrist. By maneuvering his hands closer and closer together as he talked, in a series of small spasmodic movements, he also brought the ladies' hands closer together. When they were near enough for his own thumbs to touch, he freed his left hand in one quick movement and immediately reestablished control with his right—the same hand's fingers holding Mrs. Carpenter while its wrist was being gripped by Mrs. Cobb."

Buckley: "But how could he manage that when we were all concentrating on tight control?"

"He coughed once, rather loudly, if you recall. The sound was a calculated aural distraction. In that instant—and an instant was all it took—he completed the maneuver. He also relied on the fact that a person's senses become unreliable after a protracted period of sitting in total darkness. What you think you see, hear, feel at any given moment may in fact be partly or completely erroneous."

There was a brief silence while the others digested this. Dr. Cobb said then, "Even with one hand free, how could he have rung the spirit bell? I bound him myself, Quincannon, and I am morally certain the loops and knots were tight."

"You may be certain in your own mind, Doctor, but the facts are

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otherwise. It is a near impossibility for anyone, even a professional detective, to securely tie a man to a chair with a single length of rope. And you were flurried, self-conscious, anxious to acquit yourself well of the business, and you are a gentleman besides. You would hardly bind a man such as Professor Vargas, whom you admired and respected, with enough constriction of the rope to cut into his flesh. A fraction of an inch of slack is all a man who has been tied many times before, who is skilled in muscular control, requires in order to free one hand."

Cobb was unable to refute the logic of this. He lapsed into a somewhat daunted silence as Quincannon went on to explain and demonstrate the bell-ringing trick.

"Next we have the table-tipping and levitation. Vargas accomplished this phenomenon with but one hand and one foot, the right lower extremity having been freed with the aid of the upper left." Quincannon had removed the Egyptian talisman ring from the medium's finger; he held it up, released the fingernail catch to reveal the hook within. "He attached this hook to a small eye screwed beneath the table, after which he gave a sharp upward jerk. The table legs on his end were lifted off the carpet just far enough for him to slip the toe of his shoe under one of them, thus creating a 'human clamp' which gave him full control of the table. By lifting with his ring and elevating his toe while the heel remained on the carpet, he was able to make the table tilt, rock, gyrate at will."

Sabina added, "And when he was ready for the table to appear to levitate, he simply unhooked his ring and thrust upward with his foot, withdrawing it immediately afterward. The illusion of the table seeming to float under our hands for a second or two before it fell was enhanced by both the circumstances and the darkness."

Buckley, with some bitterness: "Seems so blasted obvious when explained."

"Such flummery always is, Mr. Buckley. It's the trappings and manipulation that make it mystifying. The so-called spirit lights is another example." Sabina placed the stoppered glass bottle on the table and described where she'd found it and what it contained. "Mix white phosphorous with any fatty oil, and the result is a bottle filled with hidden light. As long as the bottle remains stoppered the phosphorous gives off no glow, but as soon as the cork is removed and air is permitted to reach the phosphorous, a faint unearthly shine results. Wave the bottle in the air and the light seems to dart about. Replace the stopper and the light fades away as the air inside is used up."

"The little winking lights were more of the same, I suppose?"

"Not quite," Quincannon said. "Match-heads were their source. Hold a match-head between the moistened forefinger and thumb of each hand, wiggle the forefinger enough to expose and then once more quickly conceal the match-head, and you have flitting fireflies."

Grace Cobb asked, "The guitar that seemed to dance and play itself—how was that done?"

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Quincannon fetched the guitar, brought it back to the table.

Beside it he set the reaching rod from Vargas's sleeve. The rod was only a few inches in length when closed, but when he opened out each of its sections after the fashion of a telescope, it extended the full length of the table and beyond—more than six feet overall. "Vargas extended this rod in his left hand," he said, "inserted it in the hole in the neck of the instrument, raised and slowly turned the guitar this way and that to create the illusion of air-dancing. As for the music . . ."

He reached into the hole under the strings, gave a quick twist. The weird strumming they had heard during the seance began to emanate from within.

Mrs. Cobb: "A music box!"

"A one-tune music box, to be precise, affixed to the wood inside with gum adhesive."

Buckley: "The hand that touched Mrs. Cobb's cheek? The manifestations? The spirit writing on the slate?"

"All part and parcel of the same flummery," Quincannon told him. Again he went to the sideboard, where he pressed the hidden release to raise its top. From inside he took out the two stuffed and wax-coated rubber gloves, held them up for the others to view.

"These are the ghostly fingers that touched Mrs. Cobb and my neck as well. The smoothness of the paraffin gives them the feel of human flesh. One 'hand' has been treated with luminous paint; it was kept covered under this"—he showed them the black cloth—"until the time came to reveal it as a glowing disembodied entity."

He lifted out the silk drapery and theatrical mask. "The mask has been treated in the same way. The combination of these two items was used to create the manifestation alleged to be Philip Cobb."

He raised the fine white netting. "Likewise made phosphorescent and draped over the head to create the manifestation purported to be the Buckleys' daughter."

"But . . . I heard Bernice speak," Margaret Buckley said weakly. "It was her voice, I'm sure it was. . . ."

Her husband took her hand in both of his. "No, Margaret, it wasn't. You only imagined it to be."

"An imitation of a child's voice," Quincannon said, "just as the other voice was an imitation of a man's deep articulation."

He picked up the two slates which bore the "spirit message" under his false signatures. "'I Angkar destroyed the evil one.' Vargas's murderer wrote those words, in sequence on one slate and upside down and backwards on the other to heighten the illusion of spirit writing. Before the murder was done, in anticipation of it."

"Who?" Buckley demanded. "Name the person, Quincannon."

"Professor Vargas's accomplice, of course."

"Accomplice?"

"Certainly. No one individual, no matter how skilled in supernatural fakery, could have arranged and carried out all the tricks we were sub-

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jected to, even if he hadn't been roped to his chair. Someone else had to direct the reaching rod to the guitar and then turn the spring on the music box. Someone else had to jangle the tambourine, make the wailing noises, carry the phosphorous bottle to different parts of the room and up onto the love seat there so as to make the light seem to float near the ceiling. Someone else had to manipulate the waxed gloves, don the mask and drapery and netting, imitate the spirit voices."

"Annabelle? Are you saying it was Annabelle?"

"None other."

They all stared at the pale, silent woman at the head of the table. Her expression remained frozen, but her gaze burned with a zealot's fire.

Dr. Cobb said, "But she wasn't in the room with us . . ."

"Ah, but she was, Doctor. At first I believed her to have been in another part of the house—not because of the locked door but because of the way in which the lights dimmed and extinguished to begin the seance. It seemed she must have turned the gas off at a prearranged time. Not so. Some type of automatic timing mechanism was used for that purpose. Annabelle, you see, was already present here before the rest of us entered and Vargas locked the door."

"Before, you say?"

"She disappeared from the parlor, you'll recall, as soon as she announced that all was in readiness. While Vargas detained us with his call for 'donations,' Annabelle slipped into this room and hid herself."

"Where? There are no hiding places . . . unless you expect us to believe she crawled up inside the fireplace chimney."

"Not there, no. Nor are there any secret closets or passages or any other such hocus-pocus. She was hidden—"

"—in the same place as her spirit props," Sabina interrupted, "within the sideboard." Her testy glance at Quincannon said he'd hogged center stage long enough; she wasn't above a bit of a flare for the dramatic herself, he thought fondly. "The interior is hollow, and she is both tiny and enough of a contortionist to fold her body into such a short, narrow space. The catch that releases the hinged top can be operated from within as well. Once the room was in total darkness and Vargas began invoking the spirits, she climbed out to commence her preparations. Under her robe, I'll warrant, is an all-black, close-fitting garment. Black gloves and a mask of some sort to cover her white face completed the costume. And her familiarity with the room allowed her to move about in silence."

"All well and good," Buckley said, "but the woman was outside the locked door, pounding on it, less than a minute after Vargas was stabbed. Explain that."

"Simple misdirection, Mr. Buckley. Before the stabbing she replaced all props in the sideboard and closed the top, then unlocked the door; the key made a faint scraping and the bolt clicked, sounds which John and I both heard. Then she crossed the room, plunged her dagger into Vargas, recrossed the room immediately after the second thrust, let

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herself out into the darkened hallway, and relocked the door from that side. Not with Vargas's key, which remained on the sideboard, but with a duplicate key of her own."

No one spoke for a cluster of seconds. In hushed tones, then, Grace Cobb asked, "Why did you do it, Annabelle?"

The psychic assistant's mouth twisted. Her voice, when it came, was fiery with passion. "He was an evil unbeliever. He mocked the spirits with his schemes, laughed and derided them and those of us who truly believe. I did his bidding because I loved him, I obeyed him until the spirits came in the night and told me I must obey no longer. They said I must destroy him. Angkar guided my hand tonight. Angkar showed me the path to the truth and light of the Afterworld. . . ."

Her words trailed off; she sat staring fixedly. Looking at no one there with her blazing eyes, Quincannon thought, but at whatever she believed waited for her beyond the pale.

It was after midnight before the bumbling constabulary (Quincannon considered all city policemen to be bumbling) finished with their questions, took Annabelle away, and permitted the others to depart. On the mist-wet walk in front, while they waited for hansoms, Cyrus Buckley drew Quincannon aside.

"You and Mrs. Carpenter are competent detectives, sir, I'll grant you that even though I don't wholly approve of your methods. You'll have my check for the balance of our arrangement tomorrow morning."

Quincannon bowed and accepted the financier's hand. "If you should find yourself in need of our services again . . ."

"I trust I won't." Buckley paused to unwrap a long-nine seegar. "One question before we part. As I told you in your offices, the first seance Mrs. Buckley and I attended here was concluded by Vargas's claim that Angkar had untied him. We heard the rope flung through the air, and when the gas was turned up we saw it lying unknotted on the floor. He couldn't have untied all those knots himself, with only one free hand."

"Hardly. Annabelle assisted in that trick, too."

"I don't quite see how it was worked. Can you make a guess?"

"I can. The unknotted rope, which he himself hurled across the room, was not the same one with which he was tied. Annabelle slipped up behind him and cut the knotted rope into pieces with her dagger, then hid the pieces in the sideboard. The second rope was concealed there with the props and given to Vargas after she'd severed the first."

"His planned finale for tonight's seance too, I fancy."

"No doubt. Instead, Annabelle improvised a far more shocking finish."

"Made him pay dearly for mocking the spirits, eh?"

"If you like, Mr. Buckley. If you like."

Quincannon had time to smoke a bowlful of shag tobacco before a hansom arrived for him and Sabina. Settled in the darkened coach on the way to Russian Hill, he said, "All's well that ends well. But I must

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say I'm glad this case is closed. Psychic phenomena, theocratic unity . . . bah. The lot of it is—"

"—horsefeathers," Sabina said. "Yes, I know. But are you quite sure there's no truth in it?"

"Spiritualism? None whatsoever."

"Not spiritualism. The existence of a spirit afterlife."

"Don't tell me you give a whit of credence to such folly?"

"I have an open mind."

"So do I, my dear, on most matters."

"But not the paranormal."

"Not a bit of it."

For a time they sat in companionable stillness broken only by the jangle of the horses' bit chains, the clatter of the iron wheels on rough cobblestones. Then there was a faint stirring in the heavy darkness, and to Quincannon's utter amazement, a pair of soft, sweet lips brushed his, clung passionately for an instant, then withdrew.

He sat stunned for several beats. At which point his lusty natural instincts took over; he twisted on the seat, reached out to Sabina with eager hands and mouth. Both found yielding flesh. He kissed her soundly.

In the next second he found himself embracing a struggling, squirming spitfire. She pulled free, and the crack of her hand on his cheek was twice as hard as the slap in Vargas's spirit room. "What makes you think you can take such liberties, John Quincannon!" she demanded indignantly.

"But . . . I was only returning your affection. . . ."

"My affection?"

"You kissed me first. Why, if you didn't care to have it reciprocated?"

"What are you gabbling about? I didn't kiss you."

"Of course you did. A few moments ago."

"Faugh! I did no such thing and you know it." Her dress rustled as she slid farther away from him. "Now I'll thank you to keep your distance and behave yourself."

He sat and behaved, not happily. Had he imagined the kiss? No, he wasn't that moonstruck. She had kissed him, for a fact; he could still feel her lips against his. Some sort of woman's game to devil him. He imagined her smiling secretly in the dark—but then the hack passed close to a streetlamp and he saw that she was leaning against the far door with her arms folded, unsmiling and wearing an injured look.

The only other explanation for the kiss . . . but that was sheer lunacy, not worth a moment's consideration. It must have been Sabina. Of course it was Sabina. And yet . . .

The hansom clattered on into the cold, damp night. ●

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CON

by Margaret Logan

Can anyone write about the social stratification of Long Island more amusingly than Margaret Logan? A native of Massapequa, Ms. Logan now lives in Southampton, the setting for her first novel (in 1988), the well-reviewed *Deathampton Summer.* When she isn't at work on "Local Slant," the opinion column she writes for *Southampton Press,* the author continues to produce novels. Her latest: *Never Let a Stranger in Your House* (St. Martin's Press). †

Born ten months apart, the Lynch sisters, christened Constance and Elaine, looked enough alike to be twins. Con had married at twenty; the following year, Lainey married too. Con had been vastly pregnant at Lainey's wedding; ten months later, copycat Lainey gave birth too. Both babies were girls.

The Lynches being such a close-knit family, neighbors in Queens who'd watched Con and Lainey growing up had noted these recurrent symmetries without surprise. It seemed natural that the new generation, Con's Lisa and Lainey's Stacy, with their wide-set, deeply blue eyes, their pert noses adorably dusted with equal quantities of freckles, their fair curls burnished with reddish lights, could be twins themselves. "It's nice," people would say. "Takes the sting out of being an only child."

Con met such remarks with an unpleasant laugh. She knew the old hypocrites were itching to be told why the sisters' breeding, slam-bang out of the gate, had come to a screeching halt.

This was, of course, before Con's husband Kevin dumped her for his bimbo.

Given a sympathetic ear instead of mealy-mouthed hypocrisy, Con would have taken grim pleasure in setting her own record straight. Lisa was an accident, she'd say. The first, last, and only good to come from my rotten marriage.

As for Lainey, who knew? The way Con figured it, Stacy had been as messy as any other baby, and sex, the act, is messy too. A double insult to Lainey's raging passion for clean. Over the years, Con had seen ample evidence that Lainey was totally off the wall on the subject. Coming home from the supermarket, she'd wash every can, jar, and

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bottle in hot soapy water before admitting them to her immaculate cupboards. A woman like that was bound to put housework, even terrible jobs like windows, miles ahead of getting down and dirty between the sheets. And, Con would bet serious money, no complaints from Steve, her husband. His raging passion was his work, his great almighty career. Coming home at nine, ten o'clock and leaving at dawn, he hardly ever laid eyes on the one kid he had. No impetus for a second, and scant opportunity to plant it.

Before long, it became obvious that Con and Lainey had married opposite kinds of men. Kevin tended bar at one of those corner places you see all over Queens. He aspired to ownership of a bar just as friendly but out on the Island and much classier. For all Kevin's good looks and flirtatious charm, you didn't have to know him long to be dead certain the classy bar would exist only in his dreams. Steve Flynn was a dynamo who, in the family phrase, could sell ice cubes to Eskimos. Starting as a salesman for a small company that made computer peripherals, he'd worked the angles of two mergers and a leveraged buyout to become head of marketing. The Flynns had punctuated each instance of corporate turmoil with the purchase of a larger house. Currently they resided in Massapequa, farther out on the Island than Kevin's wildest fantasy. Their colonial had four bedrooms and four baths, double Jacuzzi in the master. In the three-car garage were Steve's new Cherokee, Lainey's new Lexus, and a space. "That's for Stacy's car," Steve would tell you, "when she graduates B.C." Parked out back, in the canal that was a brief chug to Great South Bay, was *My Way,* Steve's thirty-five-foot Blackfin Combi, bought secondhand but mint.

Con and Lisa, invited to admire these fruits of success, were satirical. "*My Way,*" Lisa snickered to her mother. "Like, big and loud?" Con was more direct. "I see why you wanted to move, little Sis. I mean, why spend your life cleaning two and a half toilets"—the allotment of the Flynns' previous house—"when you can spend your life cleaning four?"

Nights in her Flushing one-bedroom, curled up with Buddy, the handsome Doberman that was her sole luxury, Lisa out with that gang of hers, Con might admit to envy. Kevin's erratic child support had stopped when Lisa turned eighteen. His alimony payments, equally unreliable, had been turned into a joke by inflation. On principle, Con denied him the satisfaction of crying for help, even when Krauss Tool and Die, whose office she'd run for six years, had been snuffed out by the Jap competition.

She'd enjoyed Krauss's. "The last family-owned T&D in Queens!" old man Krauss would proclaim every morning. "And the best!" Con would yell back. The middle son—married, of course—had fallen for her. After some hot, sweet smooching behind the file cabinets, she'd insisted they stop. She feared old man Krauss's censure. His hurt feelings. Also, truth to tell, the act wasn't what it once had been for her. The diseases

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alone . . . You had to wonder if the nuns had been right. She hoped to God Lisa was being careful.

Next month, the unemployment checks would stop. She'd be out pounding the pavements alongside Lisa. So, yeah, she envied Lainey's life of ease. Who wouldn't? Which wasn't to say she was blubbing in her beer about it. Con never blubbed, even when her parents, always good for a mooched meal or paying a dental bill, put their Rego Park house on the market and beat it to Florida, zip, just like that. Without a word of warning. Well, there'd been that fracas over Lisa's habit of crashing whenever the night's pleasures had ended closer to Rego Park than Flushing. Sailing in, three in the morning! Just like a duchess! Con, of course, had burst out laughing. "Ma!" she'd gasped when she was able. "What do you know about duchesses?"

The Florida condo had one bedroom. "Very small," Con's father had kept repeating. Con heard relish and satisfaction, knew the old folks were pulling in the welcome mat. Lainey heard something different. "That's okay," she'd reassured. "You'll get a Hide-A-Bed. They make real nice ones now." When time passed and it became clear no such purchase was in the offing, Lainey had blubbed her eyes out. "So they don't want us there," said Con. "So what? Like you're some kind of traveler all of a sudden? You who never leave your own yard from one week to the next?"

Soon after this exchange, on a warm evening in early June, Con unfolded her own Hide-A-Bed, the nightly action that turned the cramped living room into her and Buddy's sleeping quarters. It was Lisa's karaoke night. Con considered, not for the first time, the merits of a switcheroo. If Lisa had the Hide-A-Bed and she the bedroom, Lisa wouldn't wake her when she came in.

Like a duchess.

But the joke had drained out of that one. She brushed it away along with the switcheroo. Because face it: All that kept Lisa from bringing a boyfriend home in the middle of the night was having to slither him in and out past her mother's body, Con a famously light sleeper. Once Con was shut into her own space, behind a closed door, all bets were off.

I'm easy, Con reminded herself, but not that easy. She reached for the remote, found her program.

A rerun, wouldn't you know. She squashed the mute button as if offering the doctors and nurses an angry challenge—Suck me in again? We'll see about that!—and let her thoughts run back to Lisa's sorry work history. Never yet a job worth sticking with. Sales clerk, on your feet all day, plus the heartless public. Waitress, ditto. What sensible person wouldn't quit? She'd tried nanny, but the kids kept getting colds and whatnot, passing everything right on to her, never mind their whinging and screaming and the parents undercutting any attempt to instill a little discipline.

Lisa was bright, that was the problem. Too spunky and independent

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for the crummy jobs you get without college. Whereas dumb, wimpy Stacy . . .

Rolling down this familiar track, she was abruptly derailed by a dazzling truth, brand new. "I hate them," she announced to the empty room in tones of wonderment. "All three. I hate them worse than Kevin."

The phone rang. Caught in the vortex of revelation, Con didn't want to pick up. Lisa might be in some kind of trouble, though, and the answer thing was on the fritz.

"Con? You sound different."

"You don't," she told Lainey.

A little laugh in Massapequa. "Is that good?"

"What's up, Lainey?"

"I have to ask this favor. Steve just called—he's stuck in this emergency meeting down at the Raleigh-Durham subsidiary. He was supposed to take Stacy to the airport tomorrow, and now he can't."

And of course Lainey couldn't do it. Too busy cleaning. Six months after Steve bought her the Lexus, the odometer—Con had sneaked a peek—had read 247. "Why the airport?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Another small laugh, airy with guilt. Information had been kept from Con. On purpose. *Crissake, Lainey, when're you gonna learn to keep it simple? What Conniver doesn't know won't hurt her.* "Steve gave her this little trip."

"Did he now."

"It's a reward, kind of. She got real good grades this year, at least until the very end. Anyway, could you, Con? I know it's last minute and all, but—"

It's not like she's got anything else to do. "Where's she going?" Butter wouldn't melt in Con's mouth. "Someplace nice, I hope."

"Paris first. Once she gets the hang of it, she'll take trips out to the countryside. It's just for two weeks."

"Ooh-la-la. All by her lonesome?"

"She had a girlfriend lined up, but it fell through. She was gonna back out herself, but Steve put his foot down. He's got this fixation about broadening her horizons. Keeps hammering on her it's normal for college kids to go to Europe on their own."

"I wouldn't know," snubbed Con. "Why don't you call a limo? Massapequa must be loaded with limos."

"No limo driver's going to make sure she gets on the plane, and I'd worry myself sick. Airports attract all kinds. Terrorists, you name it. Just the other day, on the news? Those kidnappers, white-slave traders, they call them, down in Texas or wherever it was?"

Con smelled a rat. Lainey wasn't leveling about why the kid had to be hand-delivered. Torture her some more? Bring up the distinct possibility of terrorists in Paris?

For the second time that evening, Con was struck by an idea so astonishing she had to catch her breath.

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"Con? You there?"

"What time's the plane?"

"Six-thirty, but she has to be an hour early. So if you could hang around until she's actually in the air? And then call me? I know it's a lot to ask, but—"

"Yeah, yeah. That's rush hour, you know. I'll pick her up at one, and we'll hang out here awhile. At least that spares me the worst of the suburban traffic. And listen, I'll bring her home, too. . . . No, I want to. . . . Because I like hearing stuff straight out of the oven, that's why. Plus, Steve's sure to be busy that day. . . . I'm not asking, Lainey. That's the deal. You'll get your turn, but I deserve first crack. Fair's fair."

When they'd hung up, Con let out a wild whoop. On the muted TV, the doctors and nurses were tearing down their everlasting hall, shouting across their everlasting gurney. Pale thrills next to the tumult inside Con. She didn't care what time Lisa came in, she'd be wide awake. Full of karaoke, Lisa would absorb the grand idea slowly. But once it sunk in, the look on her face! Con hugged herself. She could hardly wait.

Steering her bucket of bolts onto Wantaugh State, Stacy moping in the passenger seat, Con felt giddy as a girl.

"On our way," she cried, socking the kid's arm.

"I guess," sighed Stacy.

Time to flush the rat, Con decided. "What's with you, toots? You got a problem with Paris?"

Stacy burst into noisy tears. Skillful Con dug out why long before they reached the expressway.

The friend who'd fallen through on Paris was, unbeknownst to Steve and Lainey, Mark Falco, Stacy's boyfriend since high school. (If Mark, on scholarship at Boston College, hadn't paved the way, Stacy reminded her aunt, she'd never have had the nerve to stray so terrifyingly far from her mother's side.) The trip had been Mark's idea. He'd scrounge up plane fare somehow, piggyback on Stacy's parents' largesse for everything else. Steve, overjoyed by his daughter's apparent repudiation of Lainey's countless phobias, had instantly dumped his frequent-flyer miles into a Business upgrade and prepaid the hotel. Too late, Stacy learned the horrible truth: Mark was two-timing her with her best friend. Bursting with righteous fury, she told him Paris was off. Then she tried to tell her father Paris was off.

Mile after mile of complaint on Steve, much interrupted by tears. His heartlessness. His general piggery. His total refusal to see her, Stacy, as a person with her own needs, needs that had absolutely nothing to do with stupid stupid Paris.

Then she was back on Mark, endless if-only and what-if. More tears, then on to Steve again.

The whole petty foolishness had Con so bored out of her skull she

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almost missed the Clearview turnoff. The only thing that kept her from throttling the silly brat was how beautifully this unexpected turn of events meshed with the grand idea.

Lisa eased open the apartment door. "Okay?" she whispered.

Con grinned, cocked her head toward the bedroom. "I told her to stretch out, I'd wake her in plenty of time. She wanted a Coke. I said no, I bought you this special herb tea, really kills the jet lag. She takes a swallow, wants to spit it out. You drink every drop, I say. You'll thank me for it in Paris."

"You're something else, Ma."

"The best is that no one in the building saw us. All right, listen up. The cab's coming in less than an hour, and we've got lots to cover. Here's the passport, there's her signature—"

"Oh my God. Her hair!"

"I said, none of the busybodies saw us. 'Course, I made her put it in a ponytail in the car. I pretended the AC was broken, and nothing's hotter than—"

"I'm talking about me, Ma. This." She raked frantic hands through her close-cropped curls.

"Relax. You cut it after the photo was taken."

Lisa looked dubious and—Con's heart stopped—scared. "Come on, girl! Traveling, short hair's easier to take care of."

No sooner was Lisa calmed on this than a new problem struck her. "What if I run into one of her college friends?"

"A: It won't happen, and B: If it does, you'll handle it."

"Yeah, right."

"Would you just think a minute? First place, they'll be distracted by the haircut. You listen, pick up what you can. But basically you give them this whispery croak. You've got laryngitis, the doctor said no talking, and anyway, you have to run, you're late, you have to catch a train." She reached out, gave Lisa's cute round chin a tweak. "What, you think the plane ride's gonna wipe out all your street smarts? All right then. What you have to handle, you'll handle. Let's finish the important stuff. No problem with the signature, thank God."

"Right." A complicated scowl from Lisa. Her forging capability was rooted in shame. From the grandeur of Massapequa High, Stacy had lorded it over her older but poorer cousin incessantly, faulting her clothes, her hair, her accent, even her penmanship. "You still write that way?" she'd shrieked incredulously. "Like the nuns?" Mortified, Lisa had stolen some pages of Stacy's homework and, within weeks, achieved an identical script, rounded and upright—what her long-decamped father would call classy.

"Here's your ticket. Business Class both ways."

"God. No wonder she's such a spoiled brat."

Con, deadpan: "And five thou in traveler's checks."

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She waited out Lisa's explosion of jealous rage before continuing, calm and businesslike. "Three for you, two for me and her."

Lisa's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How come?"

"Probably me and Buddy will take her on a little trip of our own. Your friends'll be calling, right? I can stall them for a while, laryngitis, all that, but two whole weeks, they'll wonder."

"They gave her five, Ma. They must've had their reasons."

"Like you said, they spoil her rotten. Your hotel's paid for, so you'll have over two hundred a day for food and whatever." Lisa's face clearing—she'd never been good with numbers—Con pressed on. "Cashing a traveler's check, you sign here. You have to do it in front of the bank teller. They'll check the passport, so before you go in the bank, paste on that sulky look of hers. Let's see it now. Great. That's her to the life. Now. The passport says to call Uncle Steve and Aunt Lainey in case of accident or emergency. You know what that means."

A weary sigh. "Yes, Ma."

"I want to hear it."

"Stay out of trouble. Don't worry, okay? I'm not the weak link in this deal. What if she starts screaming and the neighbors hear?"

Con stood. "Buddy," she said in her special voice.

The Doberman went on alert. Con pointed to the bedroom. "Guard, Buddy."

The dog was at the door in a single bound. His menacing stance and long, low growl sent Lisa into nervous giggles. "Call him off, Ma," she begged. "He's panicking me."

The buzzer sounded, announcing the cab. Con threw her arms around her daughter. "Oof," said Lisa, not liking this urgency.

"Don't forget the postcards. Every other day at least."

"I know. Give me some credit, Ma."

Would've been nice, Con thought as the door shut behind her daughter, if she'd hugged back a little. And if she'd been more impressed by her, Con's, cleverness in getting Stacy, Lisa herself, really, out of calling home the minute she arrived or anytime after. "Those foreign phones are the devil to figure," Con had told Lainey with absolute authority. "And don't you or Steve be calling her at the hotel, either. You'll have her back on the next plane, homesick to the soles of her shoes."

But the thing that really stung? For Lisa, the big excitement was the scam, pulling a fast one on the high-and-mighty Flynns. She'd been stubbornly blind to the fact that Con had whistled up, out of thin air, nothing less than a magic carpet. Two weeks, totally carefree, in Paris! It could be the start of a whole new life! So why, last night, and again today, had she balked at taking this in? Refused to show proper appreciation for the wonder of it?

Con gave herself a shake. Regrets weren't her style. Lisa had looks, brains, a great body. Her luck would find her, ready or not.

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"Okay, Buddy," she said, picking up her scissors. "Let's do it."

The two of them approached Lisa's bed. Stacy was lying on her back, snoring faintly, arms raised over her head. Like, don't shoot, I surrender. Con had a little laugh over it before carefully freeing the girl's thick ponytail.

She winked at Buddy. Two weeks was plenty of time to work Stacy over, make her believe her aunt had acted out of love for her and fear for her safety. "Don't forget," she'd say, "you brought this on yourself. You lied about Mark and then you kept lying. If your father knew the whole story, would he have risked it? Would he have sent a girl with a broken heart to a place where they don't even speak English?"

And if Stacy didn't buy it, or if the switcheroo came out in the wash some bright day, did Con actually care? The egg would be on Flynn faces, not hers. That degree of humiliation, what choice did they have but to shut up and swallow it?

Sue? For what assets? The bucket of bolts? Buddy, who'd rip their throats open?

Con had chopped off all the hair she could reach. She wasn't the crying kind, or Stacy's heightened resemblance to Lisa would've put a lump in her throat for sure. Two long weeks. Gonna really miss the kid.

Dazed by the flurry of arrival, foreign babble wherever she turned, Lisa would've lost it totally if not for Luc's firm grip on her upper arm.

It was the first time he'd touched her. Last night, after all that free champagne, she wouldn't have said no to a cuddle, but he'd been a perfect gentleman.

When he'd told her he was Luc Mercier, she'd thought "Luke," a name she'd always hated. Once he'd spelled it, though, it sounded totally different. Chic, as he'd say. He wasn't as tall as she liked, but real good-looking. His dark hair and eyes, he'd said, were from his mother's side, from the south of France. And his clothes! Navy blazer nipped in at the waist, pleated off-white linen slacks, one of those shirts with a band instead of a collar.

He was an agent. Not a salesman, an agent. For specialty French cooking oils—olive, walnut, lemon, orange, all kinds.

Business Class, she'd expected her seatmate to be some fat old guy like Uncle Steve. When she saw it was Luc, she'd been like, wow, the fun begins. Now, as he released her arm and gave her a little shove toward Passport Control, she knew he was a godsend on top of his sexy glamour. If she had any problem with Stoneface there in the passport booth, Luc would lay some French on him and fix it.

Stoneface glanced at Stacy's photo and back at Lisa. Lisa kept her sulky look but made scissoring motions around her head. Stoneface flipped a few pages, banged down his stamp, and handed the passport back. "That's it?" she said. He answered with a wave of dismissal and beckoned to Luc.

Luc had predicted he'd take longer, something about being what he'd

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ılled a "frequent flyer over the pond." Waiting, Lisa had time to wish ıe'd brushed her teeth, back in the airplane.

Finally his hand was back on her arm, steering her toward luggage ickup, then Customs, then to the street exit. "Jean-Jacques should be aiting with the car," he said. "Sadly, with our crazy traffic, one never . . ah! Here he comes, on the dot."

Don't tell me it's that big-mother Benz, thought Lisa.

It was. While Jean-Jacques put the bags in the trunk, she wriggled round in the buttery leather of the backseat thinking she'd died and one to heaven. Luc said something in French to Jean-Jacques, who ırugged one meaty shoulder and heaved himself in next to her. Luc ot behind the wheel. "I feel like driving," he told Lisa. "Jean-Jacques ill keep you company."

Lisa was about to invite herself up front, but stopped just in time. For ll she knew, this was how they did it in France. Plus, Jean-Jacques as a ringer for the big dumb bozos she'd had to deal with around ueens. The kind that take offense if you look sideways.

Paris, the big green overhead sign said, but they swept past unheed-ıg. "Hey, Luc?" she said. "Wasn't that our turn?"

"No, *cherie,* we go this way. It's much easier."

Lisa subsided and they began to talk about how they'd spend her first ıorning in the City of Light, good places to shop and eat lunch and so ırth. After quite a while she asked, "Shouldn't we be, like, getting ıere? I mean, this isn't even the suburbs, right? Actually, this looks ıore like the country than the airport did. In New York—"

The cell phone rang. "Excuse me, *cherie,"* said Luc.

He spoke briefly and hung up.

"Was that French?" Lisa asked. "Really? It didn't sound like French. isten to me, what do I know?"

"Not much."

The way he said it, she felt slapped. "Huh?"

"You asked what did you know. I said not much. I was speaking Ara-ic on the phone. I spoke in Arabic to a man in Marseilles, but of course ou don't know Marseilles, either."

"Why're you talking to me like that? What's going on here?"

Luc's laugh was ugly, his eyes, in the rearview mirror, mean as sin. A uge pit opened before her, sucking her into its hideous depths.

She wrenched herself back from the edge. "Stop the car," she com-ıanded, giving it all she had. "End of the line for this kid."

"No stopping on the autoroute."

Lisa took stock. Why Luc had turned on her was to cry over later. For ow he was nothing, unimportant. Unless he wanted to kill himself, e'd stick to his driving. Which left Jean-Jacques.

No point in starting something with him, hoping some passing driver ould see her struggles and call the cops. Traffic was heavy enough, ut the Benz had tinted glass.

In Queens, handling a backseat bozo, you grabbed ahold of what you

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could—that handle over the door—and used your other hand to flip th latch. Then you kicked the door open for the whole world to sideswip and tear off its hinges. Supposedly the bozo would pull over to spare h car and you could run away.

Worth a try, Lisa decided. France was civilized. If they chased he someone would see and report it, maybe even try to help.

Jean-Jacques was fussing with something in his jacket pocket. No or never, she decided. She swiveled like a snake, grabbed the handl Before she reached the latch, though, the man's powerful arms had ci cled her, one big fist jammed painfully under her ribs. Rhythmicall squeezing, he forced the air out of her lungs until her kicks an punches grew feeble, lazy.

He released her and, quite gently, as if she were a valuable and del cate piece of china, assisted her collapse onto the luxurious leather the seat.

Lisa's sole thought was for air, gulp after gulp of precious air. Yea afterwards, this passionate greed for air was what she remembere most vividly. Not the wetted, sweet-smelling wad Jean-Jacques presse against her nose and mouth, not the strangeness of waking at sea, fee ing the ship move beneath her, bound for a land where people spok Arabic and she would live her new life. ●

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THE COINCIDENCE

by Celia Fremlin

Sometimes, when I have finished my homework, and get down to writing up my Journal, I find myself wondering, who am I writing it *for?* Who is ever going to read the maundering thoughts of Penelope Dean, aged seventeen, and currently spending most of her time revising for A-levels?

Dull reading indeed. So perhaps, until the exams are over, I'd better record only those days when something actually *happens.*

EQMM first published Celia Fremlin's short fiction in July of 1967. The story with which she made her debut for us was a second-place winner in a joint *EQMM*/Crime Writers Association short story contest. The more than three dozen stories Ms. Fremlin has written for us since then have all been characterized by sharp observation and psychological insight, qualities on which she's made her reputation. †

May 23rd

A Happening of a sort, certainly, albeit a pretty familiar one by now. "Memorial Day" is here again, the day on which all of us at St. Olaf's School have to wear very clean white blouses and very well polished shoes to commemorate the anniversary of that dreadful day, seven years ago now, when a homicidal maniac burst into the school playground and shot dead a dozen of the girls before turning his gun upon himself.

The commemoration is very solemn, of course, and morning lessons are largely abandoned in favour of uplifting talks, first from our headmistress and then from the local vicar, for whose sermon and a few hymns we file silently through the main street of this little town and into the churchyard, where in the sparkling spring sunshine our shadows go flip, flip, flip across the grassy mounds of long-dead denizens.

Yes, the sun always seems to be shining on May twenty-third, just as it was on the awful day when it all happened.

I was only ten at the time, and because I was in the top stream for science, I not only didn't see anything, I didn't even hear the shots. The science labs are in a separate building, you see, and our break-time was scheduled for eleven o'clock, half an hour later than that of the doomed children who at half-past ten had flooded out into the

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sunshine, laughing, skipping, and improvising games.

And now, seven years later, we are being urged to learn the right lessons from this tragedy. Compassion; courage; the need to look forward to the future, not backward to the past. That sort of thing. These were the attitudes which would help overcome the shock and horror of that dreadful day.

Shock and horror? Yes, I'm sure I did feel shock and horror, I must have done. But the fact remains that the only emotion I can clearly remember is one of envy. Pure, unmitigated envy. All these reporters, all these photographers, all these television crews—and not one of them paying the slightest attention to *me* because I hadn't seen anything, didn't know anything. It was the girls that had happened to be in the playground at the time who were getting all the attention: They were interviewed, listened to, and photographed as if they were royalty. Some of them were even shown on television, evening after evening, in their best clothes and with their hair beautifully done, the whole world listening to their every stumbling word.

And that wasn't all. On top of all this, it turned out that my enemy, Pauline, was one of the dead. Pauline, who throughout the last two terms had bullied me mercilessly, setting herself to make my life a misery. Walking home from school in the afternoons, she would position herself a couple of yards behind me, with her two acolytes, and in a very loud voice, for the whole street to hear, would make cruel remarks about my personal appearance: "Fancy wearing white ankle socks with those huge fat legs!" she would shout; and her two acolytes would giggle admiringly, and passersby would stare. And sometimes it was even worse walking to school in the mornings. Sometimes the three of them would set upon me, drag my homework from my briefcase, and scribble obscene pictures all down the margins—naked breasts, erect penises, that sort of thing. Of course, I couldn't give it in like that, so I had to pretend I'd forgotten to do it, and got into endless trouble.

And now she was dead, and everyone was saying: what a tragedy, what a wonderful child she was, so kind, so full of promise, so deeply loved by her classmates; while I, who knew what she was *really* like, had to keep silent, not daring to say a word.

Of course, I was glad she was dead, it was a huge relief, but I kept thinking, if only the whole thing had happened two terms ago instead of this term, how wonderful it would have been, I'd have escaped all of that bullying.

What a self-centred little monster I must have been, to have had thoughts like those at such a time! But I was only ten, remember; I'm not like that now. It occurs to me, sometimes, that Pauline, too, if she had lived, might have changed, just as I have. She would be seventeen by now, just as I am, and we would be doing A-levels together. We might even have become good friends. It is a known thing that this can happen to people whose relationship started in savage enmity. There are plenty of examples, in real life as well as in legends.

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May 25th

The strangest day of my whole life! I must record it, even at the expense of my chemistry revision.

It all started in the early afternoon. I was on the way upstairs to my maths class when I happened to glance through a window that looks out on the Junior playground. The playground was empty at the moment—the children's lunch hour was over—but I noticed, with a small shock of concern, that there was a shabbily dressed man hanging about outside the main gate, peering in. As I watched, he seemed to be fiddling with the padlock (these gates have been kept locked during school hours ever since the tragedy of seven years ago). Of course, it *could* be just a father, wanting to talk to one of the teachers; but I felt uneasy, and decided I ought to report it to someone.

Two teachers were in the staff room when I knocked, Miss Lucas and Mrs. Pain, and they both volunteered at once to come out with me to the Junior playground and see what was going on.

"Oh. Whoever it was seems to have gone," said Miss Lucas as we descended the steps to the playground; and I was quite taken aback by her words. For there the man still was, still peering in through the ironwork. And now, for the first time, I noticed a resemblance between him and those gruesome photographs in the newspapers of seven years ago. The same little pointed beard, the same receding hairline and unhealthy complexion. Of course, it couldn't be him—he had died instantly at almost the same time as his victims; but all the same, the chance resemblance added to my unease, and also to my puzzlement.

"But, Miss Lucas," I protested, "look, he *is* still there. And see, he's still fiddling with the padlock!"

There was a pause. I could feel the two teachers looking at each other behind my back.

"Penelope, dear, I wonder if you should have your eyes tested?" one of them suggested gently. "Come along, let's go right up to the gate, just to set your mind at rest."

So right up to the gate we went; but it didn't set my mind at rest, for the man was still there. For a moment, I was looking right into his eyes; those very same eyes—or almost—as the ones that had stared at us night after night from the television screen, all those years ago.

"Miss Lucas! Mrs. Pain!" I almost shrieked. "He *is* there. You can *see* him. He's staring right at us. . . ."

By this time, the two teachers were one on each side of me, nervously clutching my arms as they propelled me back into the school building.

"Penny, dear, you really must try to calm yourself," urged Mrs. Pain. "You've been working too hard, that's what it is. You must give yourself a little holiday. . . . No more revising and sitting up late. . . ."

She was trembling from head to foot as we walked along, I could feel it as she clutched my arm so tightly.

By now, we had reached the sick bay, Nurse Williams had been summoned, and the two bewildered teachers thankfully handed me over to

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her care. I could still hear their voices, through the closed door, as they retreated along the corridor. "Nervous breakdown . . . exam hysteria . . . brain exhaustion" floated into my ears with the sound of their retreating footsteps.

Nurse Williams was altogether more reassuring. "All this nonsense!" was her comforting assessment of the situation. She gave me a hot drink and two white pills which I'm sure were just aspirin, and assured me they'd help me to get a good sleep, and I'd wake up right as rain.

I didn't get the good sleep—I had no intention of doing so—and as soon as Nurse Williams had bustled off, presumably on her next errand of mercy, I slipped off the couch, slipped my shoes back on, and hurried as fast as I could back to the Junior playground.

It was full of children now—they were rushing around having their afternoon break. They were rushing about, giggling, pushing, shouting, just as they'd been on that tragic day seven years ago; and to my horror—but somehow not to my surprise—the man was still there. No longer just staring, nor fiddling with the padlock, but actually climbing the gate with amazing skill and agility; seeking, with his scuffed shoes, first one foothold and then another in the ornamental ironwork.

I tried to warn the children. I shouted, I tried to hustle them indoors; but it was no good. They reacted first with surprise and then with puzzlement. "But there *isn't* a man!" they kept saying; and it wasn't many minutes before they came to the same conclusion as Miss Lucas and Mrs. Pain had come to, only they expressed it differently.

"Penny's gone bananas!" they chanted gleefully, dancing around me. "Penelope Dean is bonkers!"

I didn't tell them off. I had no attention to spare for them at all, for by now the intruder had successfully scaled the gate and was rapidly descending on the inner side. And now he was rushing headlong across the playground, somehow avoiding any collisions with any of the children, who were continuing with their play exactly as if he didn't exist.

Up the short flight of steps he raced, through the doorway into the main building, with me hot on his heels. Well, what else could I do? I had to stop him somehow, from whatever it was that he planned to do.

But he moved so fast, so fast. Along the corridors, up the flights of stairs, which he seemed to take four or five steps at a time, almost as if he was flying. There was no way I could keep up such a pace, and very soon I lost him. I did not know if he had turned left or right . . . up or down. I was totally at a loss, I couldn't think what to do, and so I just stood still, in the middle of a corridor, waiting. Waiting for what? I didn't know, but I knew that something was going to happen. I knew it in my bones, and in the thudding of my heart.

And then it did happen. The bell rang for Fire Practice and I can't tell you what a relief it was, rescuing me instantly from my state of paralysis. Fire Practice at St. Olaf's is taken seriously, and run with military precision. Wherever we happen to be in the building, we all know exactly what we have to do ("Walk briskly, don't run.") and exactly

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which exit to make for. So on this occasion, as on all previous ones, we were out of the school and on the far side of the playing field within the allotted seven minutes. The standard roll call was beginning.

But it never finished. For suddenly someone shouted, "Look! Look!" and at once the cry was taken up: "Look! Look!"

We had all heard the plane approaching, and now, two or three miles away across the fields, it could be seen lurching strangely, and—yes—even while we watched, tiny figures could be seen floating with their parachutes beneath it.

The crash, when it came, was so loud it was almost not like a sound at all: more like an earthquake, like the sky falling apart all round us.

We scarcely realised, in those first moments of shock, that it was our school building that had been hit, and that the whole top floor was virtually in ruins.

May 27th

It's been filling all the front pages of all the newspapers, of course; and all the radio and television programmes as well. "Disaster School . . . Fate Strikes Again," screamed some of the headlines; "Miraculous Escape—800 Girls Safe and Sound," proclaimed others, expatiating on the extraordinary stroke of luck by which the crash came just minutes after the school fire bell had been accidentally set off, without the knowledge of any of the staff. "An Astonishing Coincidence," as the headline declared.

Astonishing coincidence; they can say that again, but they don't know the half of it. They do not know that on that very same afternoon an A-level student named Penelope Dean suffered repeated hallucinations of seeing the mass murderer of seven years ago once more breaking into the school premises.

An "Amazing Coincidence" indeed. A triple coincidence, almost beyond belief.

Almost. Billions and billions of chances against it anyway.

Of course, once the psychic people get hold of it they will claim that none of it was a coincidence at all. For the spiritualists, in particular, it will be a field day. The murderer, they will claim, having been rendered virtuous and remorseful by his seven-year sojourn in the Other World, has sought to compensate as far as he could for his evil deed by coming back as a ghost and ringing the fire bell just in time to evacuate the school buildings before the crash. Thus he saved the lives of all those girls who would otherwise have been killed, Penelope Dean among them.

A comforting sort of explanation, I suppose, and tempting to some.

But not to me. Hang it all, I'm a science student; I plan one day to be a scientist, perhaps even an important one. How can I possibly believe in this sort of superstitious rubbish?

The alternative, of course, is to believe that there has been a triple coincidence so extraordinary that many would say it is even harder to

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believe in than the above mystical one; but they would be wrong. There is *no* coincidence so extraordinary that it *can't* happen, even though the chances against it may be billions of billions to one. This one chance *could* come up; the possibility of this outcome is never absolutely nil. For it may well be that each one of the other billions of possibilities was equally unlikely; but *one* of them has got to come up. Let's suppose that you've got a supermarket of which it is known that about two thousand people shop there on Saturday afternoons. It would be possible (though wearisome) to go there with a notebook one Saturday and get the name and address of every single person who entered. The actual chance of these being the very ones they are is remote in the extreme, as you would soon discover if you had tried to predict the outcome by taking two thousand names at random off the voting register. All the same, they *were* there, this particular lot, unlikely though it was that they would be. Equally unlikely would be any other particular lot; but one or other of these unpredictable lots will be there, Saturday after Saturday, despite the billions and billions of chances against it being exactly them.

Gosh, I do hope we get a question about Probability Theory in our Philosophy exam. (Yes, we *are* to do our A-level exams, in spite of everything; they've organised a room for us at the Town Hall.)

On Probability Theory I can write a really brilliant essay, I know I can, so I'll pray we'll get a question on it.

Oops! Did I say "pray"? Just a slip of the tongue, I promise you. ●

"I warned you that the next time you asked me a loaded question you'd get the same kind of answer."

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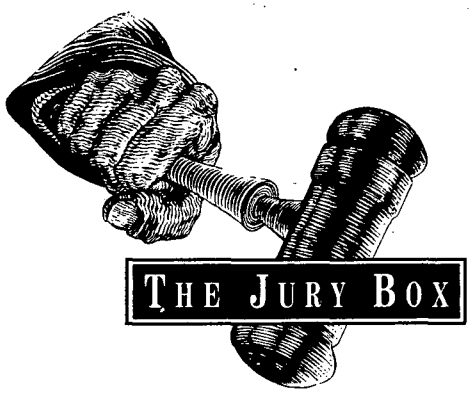

by Jon L. Breen

Most readers of popular fiction think of Max Brand, best known by the pseudonym of Frederick Faust (1892-1944), as a writer of Westerns or perhaps as the creator of the long-running medical hero Dr. Kildare. He certainly is not widely thought of as a writer of detective fiction. But as the "About the Author" note of the book reviewed below tells us, "His enormous output, totaling approximately thirty million words or the equivalent of 530 ordinary books, covered nearly every field: crime, fantasy, historical romance, Westerns, science fiction, adventure, animal stories, love, war, and fashionable society, big business and big medicine." After Faust was killed in action while serving as a World-War-II correspondent, "New books based on magazine serials or unpublished manuscripts continued to appear so that, alive or dead, he has averaged a new book every four months for seventy-five years." That at least one of the current publishers of his work is a university press suggests Brand was not just a prolific commercial phenomenon but a writer of enduring literary value. Faust didn't hang up his poet's gift for language before entering the pulp-magazine door.

*** Max Brand: *Seven Faces*, University of Nebraska Press, 312 North 14th St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0484; $25. Brand's odd-couple team of New York detectives, Angus Campbell and Patrick O'Rourke, may be based on traditional Scottish and Irish stereotypes, but they gradually emerge as well-realized characters. Their boss, Inspector Corrigan, says, "Separate they're not much but, when they're together, they hate each other so much that they grind one another sharp as razors." Assigned to protect a frightened millionaire traveling by train from New York to Chicago, they become involved in a complicated whodunit that provides details of the 1935 period—slang, attitudes, modes of communication, appliances, the feel of rail and air transportation—more fascinating than the story. True, the plot, though surprising and fair to the reader,

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might not stand close scrutiny, but some of the dialogue and descriptive touches are magical. Published as a six-installment serial in *Detective Fiction Weekly* in 1936 and now appearing for the first time in book form, the novel has been restored to the author's original text. Though I don't know what changes the editor made, I suppose some of the literary notes struck in the narrative, fast as they go by, were considered too rich for the pulp reader's blood.

**** Sharyn McCrumb: *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, Dutton, $23.95. While recuperating from wounds suffered at the end of *The Rosewood Casket* (1996), Sheriff Spencer Arrowood passes the time researching an historic North Carolina case: the 1832 trial of young backwoods wife Frankie Silver for the murder of her husband. In contrast to its detective-fiction precedents (Alan Grant's investigation of the Richard III case in Josephine Tey's classic *The Daughter of Time* [1951] and Chief Inspector Morse's reexamination of a fictional nineteenth-century Oxford crime in Colin Dexter's *The Wench is Dead* [1989]), this novel spends a good deal of time in the historical period, as the local court clerk describes the course of the Silver case with a fine combination of humor, character observation, and telling detail. To justify the novel's 384-page length, there are also flashbacks to a murder hunt early in Arrowood's career, its convicted perpetrator soon to be executed after the traditional decades on death row, and a present-day case the sheriff's subordinates are trying to keep him ignorant of until he has fully recovered. This is another gem in one of the very best contemporary series.

*** John Lutz and David August: *Final Seconds*, Kensington, $23. Will Harper, who left the N.Y.P.D. bomb squad after losing three fingers in a failed disarming, and Harold Addleman, a former FBI profiler of serial killers, emerge from unhappy forced retirements to outthink a bomber who targets celebrities. Aside from first-rate suspense, the authors provide some subtle satire of media-obsessed America as they depict victims clearly inspired by Tom Clancy and Rush Limbaugh, among others. (August is the pseudonym of David Linzee, whose *Death in Connecticut* [1977] was one of the best first novels of its decade.)

Admirers of John Mortimer's aged barrister Horace Rumpole (of the Bailey), a longtime favorite of PBS viewers and *EQMM* readers, will welcome *The Third Rumpole Omnibus* (Penguin, $16.95), a trade paperback bargain gathering 19 stories originally published in the collections: *Rumpole and the Age of Miracles* (1988), *Rumpole à la Carte* (1990), and *Rumpole and the Angel of Death* (1995). (The back cover mistakenly advertises *Rumpole on Trial*, a collection not included here.)

For all the influx of excellent, good, and publishable writers to enter the mystery field in recent years, the Golden Age of the thirties still retains much of its cachet. The novels of Ngaio Marsh, who delighted readers

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from that decade into the eighties, always have a ready readership. See, for example, two of the best cases for Scotland Yard's Roderick Alleyn, both reprinted by St. Martin's at $5.99: *Death at the Bar*, a fine 1940 puzzle in which a dart game at a seaside pub ends in the murder of a prominent barrister; and *Death and the Dancing Footman*, a 1941 model of the isolated-house-party whodunit, including a manipulative host and a splendid cast of mutually-hostile guests.

I don't know if there are any unpublished novels still to come by the late William L. DeAndrea, but he was apparently busy on the short-story front in the months before his death in 1996 at a tragically young forty-four. The Mickey Spillane/Max Allan Collins anthology *Private Eyes* (Signet, $6.50), reviewed in this space in July, includes "Killed in Good Company," a novel-in-miniature about network trouble-shooter Matt Cobb, typically well-clued and featuring an inventive murder method; while *Once Upon a Crime* (Berkley, $21.95), a generous anthology of stories based on Grimm's Fairy Tales edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, has "Prince Charming," a tricky romantic puzzle that is not part of a series but might have become one were life fairer.

Readers of this magazine don't need telling that Michael Gilbert, born in 1912 and still going strong, is one of the best and most versatile writers of crime fiction at both novel and short-story lengths. Now esteemed scholar B.A. Pike has compiled *The Short Stories of Michael Gilbert: An Annotated Checklist 1948-1997* (CADS, 9 Vicarage Hill, South Benfleet, Essex SS7 1PA; $7 surface, $8 air). The collectors to whom the 58-page chapbook is directed will want it even more knowing each copy is signed by both Pike and Gilbert.

Serious students of mystery fiction can't do without the long-awaited second edition of *Walter Albert's Detective and Mystery Fiction: An International Bibliography of Secondary Sources* (Brownstone Books/Borgo Press, P.O. Box 2845, San Bernardino, CA 92406-2845; $100 hardcover, $80 paperback). The 5000-plus annotated entries of the 1985 first edition have grown to nearly 7700—that the 2500-item increase covers a period of only six years, through the cut-off date of 1990, shows how much critical, biographical, historical, and bibliographic material on the genre has exploded in recent years. The scope of coverage and reliability of information are remarkable. Of an impressive list of contributing mystery scholars, John L. Apostolou, Jacques Baudou, Robert E. Briney, and Loris Rambelli, along with editor Albert, have provided new material for both editions.

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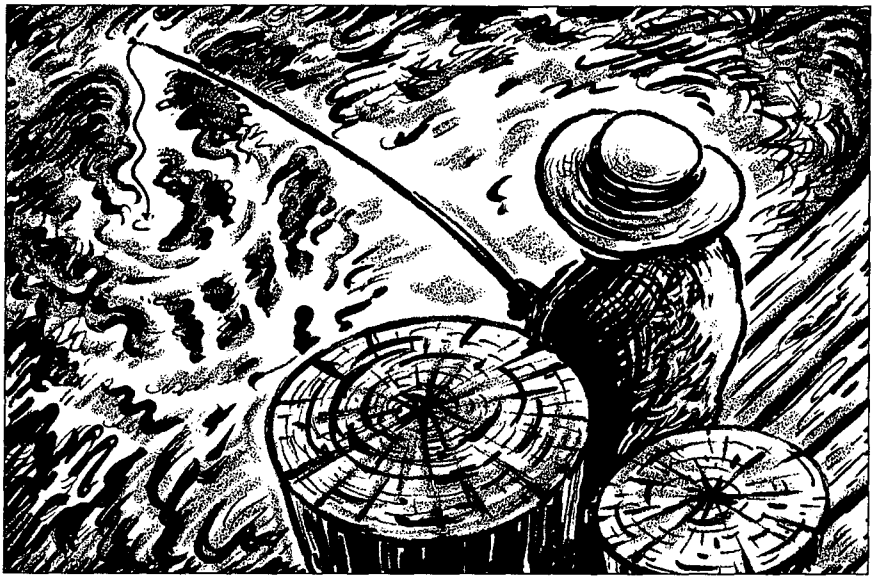

Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE STARKWORTH ATROCITY

by Edward D. Hoch

Unlike the traditional image of the Gypsy, Michael Vlado had never been a wanderer. He would have been quite content to live with his wife in the foothills of Romania's Transylvanian Alps, breeding horses and working with the members of his clan, had not circumstances thrust a different role upon him. He became king of his tribe when just past forty years of age, at a time when European persecution of Gypsies, together with political upheavals in Eastern Europe, were changing his life in unexpected ways. Hardly a year passed now when he was not summoned to a faraway place to plead the cause of Romanies seeking political asylum.

That was how he happened to be traveling by train through the Channel Tunnel on his way to England in late October of 1997. Thousands of Gypsies, facing increased persecution in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, had been encouraged to flee by a television program's favorable portrayal of Canada as welcoming Romany immigrants.

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When Canada insisted on stricter entry rules, the focus shifted to Britain. Once there, the rumors said, it was easier to travel the rest of the way to Canada.

Michael had answered a direct appeal from Colonel Jugger, an official of the European Union, to travel with him to Dover and examine the problem in person. Now, passing through the seemingly endless tunnel beneath the English Channel, he listened while the colonel outlined the problem, speaking English with only a slight accent. "It is said that upwards of six thousand Gypsies are on their way to Britain. Most will arrive by the less expensive cross-channel ferries, but however they come, Dover is the most likely port of entry. They have a real problem there, compounded by the recent Dublin Convention on Immigration ruling that asylum-seekers may apply for refuge in the country in which they wish to live. Britain can no longer simply send them back across the channel."

Gypsy Michael Vlado, who first appeared in 1985, is a relatively late creation of Edward D. Hoch's, and unlike most of the author's other characters he was not first conceived with *EQMM* in mind but for an anthology of "ethnic" detectives. Vlado has turned out to be a valuable figure in the Hoch gallery, for he is at the center of a changing Europe and he allows the author to deal with interesting contemporary issues. ✝

"The European Union is making many changes to the old rules," Michael observed.

"Too many, in the British view of things, which is why they're resisting a full acceptance of the Union. But here we are, at last." The train burst into the sunlight without warning, and Michael Vlado was on British soil for the first time in his life.

They rolled into the station a bit farther along. Colonel Jugger, a slender man of military bearing who was taller than Michael by a couple of inches, had arranged for a car to meet them. He was a retired officer in the former West German army who'd taken the job with the European Union a couple of years earlier. His specialty was migration between various countries in the Union, which automatically made him an expert on Gypsies. It was men like Jugger who would change the map of Europe in the decades to come, for better or worse. Now, as Michael followed him down the steps to the waiting car with its small EU banners mounted on the front fender, he felt increasingly out of place. He didn't belong here. He was no sort of politician.

"There's an unused nursing home at Starkworth, about twenty miles from here," Jugger was saying. "The government has pressed it into service to help provide emergency accommodations for Gypsies requesting asylum, at least until the courts can rule on their requests." He gave the driver a route to their destination and the black sedan sprang into

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motion, traveling swiftly and silently up Marine Parade Road to the A2.

"I'm not too familiar with the Romany population in Britain," Michael admitted.

"They're often called Travelers, a term that includes both Gypsies and itinerant speakers of the Shelta language. We estimate that there are about fifty thousand in all, with another twenty thousand in Ireland."

"Shelta?"

"It's a private language, based partly on Irish. Apparently it's spoken only by Travelers in the British Isles. These are hard times for itinerant people hereabouts. In the past, Gypsies camped in the countryside, even in some distant corner of a large estate. They were out of sight and bothered no one, sometimes even proving useful as seasonal farm workers. But as the population grew and empty areas became less common, conflicts emerged. The new suburban communities did not want Gypsies on their doorstep. The Caravan Site Act of nineteen sixty-eight obliged local authorities to provide camping areas for them, but generally these were in the least desirable areas of town. Needless to say, this new wave of Gypsy immigration is not welcome here."

After a time the car turned off the A2. They headed back toward the coast and through the country town of Starkworth. It was probably like many others, with a clock tower on the town hall and an old stone church dating from at least the last century, but it was the first one Michael had seen in England. Soon they reached their destination, a sprawling white building surrounded by a grove of trees across from a school. Until a year ago it had been the Starkworth Nursing Home, Jugger explained. Unused since then, the county council had agreed to the government suggestion that Gypsy immigrants be housed there until their status was clarified. "How many can they handle here?" Michael wondered.

"About one hundred, more if they installed cots in the recreation room. Right now I believe they're around half of capacity."

The car pulled up behind a white MG, the only other vehicle in evidence. "I expect we'll be about an hour," Colonel Jugger told the driver.

Jugger was a few steps ahead of Michael going up the walkway to the front door, so he was the first to spot the body sprawled in the doorway, its head and shoulders on the brick entryway. As he hurried to the young man, who was clad in a white jacket and pants, Michael looked beyond him into the front hall of the nursing home. He could see two more figures on the floor. "Something's happened here!"

Jugger turned the man over. He was alive but gasping for breath. "What is it? What happened to you?"

The man opened his eyes for an instant. "Gas," he muttered. "They're all—"

Michael's hand was on the door, but Jugger shouted a warning. "Don't go in there! Something bad has happened here. Tell our driver to phone for police and ambulances!"

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What was to become known around the world within hours as the Starkworth Atrocity began to unfold with the arrival of the first police car and ambulance. Two officers circled the building, peering in all the ground-floor windows, and came back to report that there were bodies everywhere. After that the local fire brigade was summoned and two men in rubber coats and gas masks entered the nursing home carrying gauges to measure the extent of impurities in the air. They returned almost at once and the firefighters set up a large exhaust fan in the doorway, pointed toward the sky. On the opposite side of the building they smashed windows so that fresh air could enter and help dissipate the fumes.

An hour later, when they reentered the nursing home, they brought back the stark statistics. There were fifty-three bodies of men, women, and children inside, plus two women volunteers who had been tending to the immigrants' needs. Only the male orderly had survived. In the basement of the building, near the heating ducts, two empty metal canisters had been found. When he learned of that, Colonel Jugger asked to see the canisters.

Only the firefighters and some police officers in protective gear had been allowed into the nursing home thus far, and Michael was still standing outside with Colonel Jugger when one of them came out with the canisters. He thought the blood drained from the colonel's face at the sight of them. "They're the sort used at Auschwitz," Jugger said grimly. "Cyanide pellets are dissolved in acid to produce quick-working hydrogen cyanide gas."

"I know about Auschwitz," Michael agreed. "Jews and Gypsies were gassed there routinely. Are you telling me that someone deliberately killed these people in the manner used at Nazi death camps?"

The German hung his head. "I fear that a terrible crime has been committed here."

Though he'd planned to visit other immigrant sites during his stay, it was clear to Michael that the massacre at Starkworth took precedence over all else. Michael and Jugger made arrangements to spend at least one night at a hotel a few blocks from the nursing home. It was one of a popular chain of lodgings, five stories high, with a dining room and meeting suites on the top floor affording a sweeping view of the sea.

Michael knew that whoever the killer and whatever the motive, the truth had to be uncovered quickly before the media had an opportunity to launch its own conspiracy theories. The rest of the afternoon was a blur of police questioning and phone calls from Jugger back to his superiors in Brussels. It was well after seven before they were able to avoid the press and sneak away for a light meal and ale at a nearby pub. By that time the television networks had interrupted their regular programming for coverage of what was already being called the Starkworth Atrocity.

"Fifty-five men, women, and children are dead," the newsreader was

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reporting in an urgent yet somber tone, "and another is hospitalized in fair condition. Although autopsies are not yet complete, police believe they were victims of an attack by hydrogen cyanide gas introduced through the nursing home's heating ducts. Recent arrivals in Dover of large groups of Gypsies seeking asylum here have strained the area's resources and increased tensions, though there has been no previous act of violence against the new arrivals. Officials estimate some eight hundred European Gypsies have landed at Dover in recent weeks, and efforts are under way to provide emergency accommodations and education. Fears have been expressed in some quarters that today's atrocity might be the beginning of a terrorist campaign targeted at Gypsy immigrants."

"Do you believe that?" Michael asked Colonel Jugger.

"I'm trying not to. Terrible as it is, a single madman would be preferable to a terrorist campaign. That is, it would be preferable once he was captured and behind bars. Do you think you could help us with that?"

Michael held out his palms in a gesture of helplessness. "I know no more than you do, Colonel."

Jugger lowered his voice just a bit. "The EU office supplied me with your dossier. You have been very helpful in the past, both in local criminal investigations and in events farther afield. They have a commendation from a Captain Segar, formerly of the Romanian government militia."

"Segar is an old friend."

"I hope we can be friends too. I need any help you can give me on this, Michael." It was his first use of Michael's given name.

"Isn't it a matter for the local police and Scotland Yard?"

"The European Union has a large stake in the matter too. An unpunished terrorist act against a migrating people could encourage more such acts, against Gypsies, Muslims, Jews, Irish, Africans, Asians, almost anyone! One of the goals of the EU is the free movement of goods and people between the various European states."

"Where would I begin?" Michael wondered aloud. "Everyone is dead."

"That orderly survived. He might know something."

By morning the town of Starkworth was in a frenzy. Television crews from the BBC and the independent networks were crowding the lanes with their trucks, and more American and European correspondents were arriving by the hour. Teams of Scotland Yard investigators were everywhere, and before Colonel Jugger and Michael had even finished their breakfast eggs they were being interviewed by a pair of dour-looking investigators from London. They told their story of finding the bodies, which was really all they knew.

"What about Mr. Isaacson?" one of the Scotland Yard men asked. His name was Inspector Drexell and he carried his excess weight with seeming ease.

"Who?" Michael questioned.

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"The sole survivor. The man you found in the doorway. We need to know exactly what he said."

Jugger thought for a moment and answered, "I think it was, 'Gas, they're all dead.' Isn't that what he said, Michael?"

"As I remember it."

"Nothing else?"

They both shook their heads. "His breathing was bad," Michael said. "How is he today?"

"The doctors say he's coming along fine," the inspector said. "He should be released soon."

"We need to speak with him," Jugger said. "The European Union will want a full report on this."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible until after we've interviewed him."

"Have you been able to trace those canisters?" Michael asked.

"I'm not at liberty to talk about that."

They departed soon afterward and Colonel Jugger spent the rest of breakfast deep in thought. "They may be onto something. That fellow Drexell—"

They were interrupted by the sudden arrival in the hotel dining room of a tall, blond woman. Wearing a short black leather jacket, a tight skirt that ended just above the knees, and a knapsack over her shoulder, she strode purposefully across the room to their table, pale blue eyes taking in the scene. "Which of you is Michael Vlado?" she asked.

"I am," Michael acknowledged with a smile.

"Katie Blackthorn, Skywatch World Service. I'd like to interview you about the killings."

Michael must have looked blank, because Jugger had to mutter into his ear, "Television. Go ahead!"

"I only know what's been on the news," he said.

"I understand you are a Gypsy king who came here specifically to meet with the victims. That's what I want to ask you about."

Michael reluctantly followed her to a secluded corner of the hotel lobby where her cameraman was waiting. "This is Dominick," she said. "He's my eyes. Dominick, I'll need about three minutes with Mr. Vlado here, maybe with that wall as a background."

"How are you?" Dominick said, shaking hands as he balanced the video camera on his shoulder. He was a husky man with dark hair and a trace of beard, wearing a rock-group T-shirt. Positioning himself a few feet away, he aimed the camera. "Ready when you are, Katie."

The cameraman shot some footage as she introduced Michael to the viewers, and then she asked Michael a preliminary question about being a king of the Gypsies. "I am only king of my clan," Michael explained. "Gypsies have many clans and many kings. Because of the recent increase in Gypsy migration to Britain, I was asked by the European Union to meet with these groups and establish their true destination."

"Some say they're bound for Canada."

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He nodded. "That's what I was trying to determine. Tragically, these killings occurred before we could talk."

"Do you believe it was an attempt to discourage Gypsy immigration?"

"I really don't know. Right now I'm still trying to get over the terrible shock of this atrocity."

Katie Blackthorn relaxed and allowed herself to smile. "Thank you, Mr. Vlado," she said, and then after a pause, "That's it, Dominick."

Dominick stopped filming and replayed the tape for her. Michael stayed to watch and heard her cell phone beeping. She took it from her duffel bag and answered with a touch of impatience. "Blackthorn here." Apparently it was no one she knew and she seemed ready to hang up when something the caller said caught her interest. "Cubberth? How did you get my phone number?" Then, "All right. At the pier in an hour."

She broke the connection and stowed away the phone. "A fan," she told her cameraman. "The office gave him my number. Shoot some footage of the church and the town hall for atmosphere. I'll see you back at the hotel around noon."

Michael returned to the table and finished his breakfast. "That's probably the first of many interviews you'll be giving," Jugger predicted.

"She seems nice enough. I'll have to look for myself on the evening news."

"I must report in to the immigration people about this business. Do you want to come along?"

Michael shook his head. "I'd rather look around the town. I came here to speak with Gypsies and I haven't seen a live one yet."

Their waitress brought them the check. "They just said on the telly the Prince of Wales is coming this afternoon to see the place where it happened!"

"The media will love that," Colonel Jugger decided. "I understand they are even worse here than in Germany."

Michael departed, feeling he'd better get started if he wanted to see anyone before the traffic jams began. The local police were already fighting a losing battle to keep the main streets passable. He intercepted one officer and asked directions to the local caravan site. "Straight down the road to the railroad tracks, then left for about a half-mile," he said. "But you won't find any Travelers there, if that's what you're looking for. They've all left town. Frightened, I suppose."

Michael glanced at his watch and saw it was only ten-thirty. He set off for the site, following directions. When he reached it nearly twenty minutes later the field was indeed deserted, but he saw an elderly man with a thick cane walking about with a dazed look on his face. As he drew nearer, Michael could make out some intricate carvings on the cane. He had seen such canes before, carried by older Gypsies. "Pardon me," he said. "Are you a Traveler?"

The man replied in a language Michael had never heard, and he

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switched to Romany, asking the question again. Still the old man talked on unintelligibly, and Michael remembered Jugger's mention of a language called Shelta, spoken by some Travelers. "Shelta?" he asked.

The man's face brightened for the first time, in recognition of the word. Michael tried Romany again, speaking more slowly. If there were Gypsies of many tribes here they must have some way of communicating. "What is your name?" he asked the man.

"Granza," he said finally. "Where have my people gone?" His knowledge of Romany was faulty but understandable.

"You are Granza?"

A nod. "Granza Djuric. When I left yesterday the caravan was camped here."

"There has been a terrible tragedy," Michael tried to explain. "Many Gypsies newly arrived from Europe died here yesterday. Your people have fled."

Suddenly a lone horseman appeared at the other end of the field, riding toward them. He was young, in his twenties, and wore a colorful shirt that caught the wind as he rode. "Granza!" he shouted as he approached.

"See?" Michael told the old man. "You are not forgotten!"

Granza Djuric smiled. "It is Dane, my grandson."

As the rider dismounted, Michael greeted him. "Michael Vlado. I am king of a Rom tribe in the foothills of Romania. I have come here because of the immigrants."

The young man, with curly black hair and a gold tooth that was visible when he smiled, shook hands. "I am Dane Morgan. We left at dawn and I thought my grandfather was in another caravan. We only now realized he was missing and I rode back for him."

"You left because of the deaths?"

He nodded. "A terrible thing. Some people think we did it. Others believe we could be the next victims. Either way, it was time to move on."

"It's important the police find whoever is responsible. Someone may be trying to keep Roms from coming here."

"We have not heard details, only that many people died."

"Fifty-five in all," Michael confirmed, "counting two volunteers who were staying with them. Poison gas was used."

"My grandfather knows about that. He was at Auschwitz. He almost died there."

"Have you heard anything at all? Did the residents of Starkworth resent the arrival of more Gypsies?"

"Some might have, but they were only here temporarily." He thought for a moment. "There was one man . . ."

"Who?"

"His name was Cubber or Cubberth. He had a laboratory nearby and he manufactured drugs like LSD. Tried to sell us some a few weeks ago but we sent him on his way."

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Where had he heard that name before? "A laboratory?"

"So he said. To him Travelers are nothing but fortune-tellers, beggars, and gamblers. He wanted money from us. And I heard him complaining about more Gypsies coming from Eastern Europe."

"Cubberth." Michael repeated the name. He remembered now. It was the person Katie Blackthorn had agreed to meet in one hour at the pier. Checking his watch again, he saw that it was a few minutes to eleven. If he hurried back he might be in time for that meeting. "Which way is the pier?" he asked Dane Morgan.

"Did you come from town?"

"From the hotel."

"There's a shorter way back to the pier." He gave Michael careful directions and then helped his grandfather up onto the horse. "We'll be camped tonight further west along the coast, near Whitstable," he said. Michael waved as they rode away.

The Starkworth pier was about a hundred feet long and seemed to be a town fishing spot. There was a narrow rocky beach on either side, but nothing that would invite swimmers. Michael got there by eleven-fifteen and saw a lone fisherman out near the end, wearing a broad-brimmed hat that shielded his head against the noonday sun. Another man was just stepping onto the pier. He was balding, without a hat, and seemed a bit hesitant in his movements. Finally he headed toward the fisherman at the end of the pier.

For a moment Michael wondered if the fisherman might be Katie Blackthorn, disguising herself to hide from rival press people. But then he saw her come around the corner of a building, walking fast toward the pier, her knapsack over one shoulder. He moved quickly after her, but was too far away to beat her onto the pier. The balding man had reached the end and was seated next to the fisherman, his back against one of the wooden posts.

Michael was still only about halfway to the end of the pier when the television reporter reached the two men. He couldn't quite see what she did because her body shielded them from Michael's view. But he saw her jump back as if stung by some unseen hornet. The broad-brimmed hat that the fisherman wore had fallen to the dock, and his jacket collapsed beneath it. Katie Blackthorn screamed and Michael broke into a run.

"What is it?" he called out as he reached her.

She turned to him, terrified. "He's dead!"

"The fisherman?"

"There is no fisherman. I think this is a man named Cubberth."

The balding man was slumped against the wooden post, his throat torn by a jagged weapon. At his feet lay a bloody fish scaler. Michael looked around. "I saw someone out here fishing."

"A coat and hat were propped up with this broomstick. That is what you saw."

"Then who killed him?"

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"I have no idea." She squinted at him in the sunlight. "You're that Gypsy, Michael Vlado."

"That's right."

She pulled the cell phone from her duffel bag and jabbed the button for the operator. "Police! It's an emergency! There's a dead man on the Starkworth pier." Then, after being connected, she repeated the information, adding, "I'm a television journalist. My name is Katie Blackthorn. Yes, I'll stay right here till you arrive." She broke the connection and immediately punched in another number. "Dominick, I'm at the pier. Get down here with your camera right away!"

Within a minute they heard the sound of an approaching siren. "What are you doing here?" she asked Michael.

"I remembered Cubberth's name from when he phoned you back at the hotel. I was questioning a local Traveler just now and the name came up. I decided to join your meeting with him."

"How did his name come up?"

"I'd better wait and tell that to Inspector Drexell."

The stocky Scotland Yard man was one of the first to arrive. "Were you together when you found him?" he asked Michael and the newswoman while his assistants were examining the body.

Michael explained that he arrived at the pier just as the victim was walking out toward the end. "I knew Cubberth had an appointment with Miss Blackthorn and I guessed this might be him. She was just a few seconds behind him."

The inspector turned toward her. "Miss Blackthorn?"

"Cubberth phoned me at the hotel this morning. The station gave him my number. He claimed to have information about yesterday's killings. He said he'd meet me here at the pier."

"And what's your connection with Cubberth?" he asked Michael.

"One of the Travelers told me he has a laboratory near here. He's been making LSD and other chemicals. If he had something to tell the press, it might have involved the killings."

The inspector nodded. Dominick had arrived with the video camera on his shoulder and was panning down the pier. "The body's at the end," Katie shouted. "Get down there!"

He hurried past them. "I was filming around the town hall like you said. I've got great footage for you."

"Good! Now get me some blood and guts!"

"Is that what you want, Miss Blackthorn?" the inspector asked with a certain grimness. "Were fifty-five bodies not enough for you?"

"That's—that's so terrible my viewers will have trouble grasping it. A single body with his throat cut is more understandable."

"Do I need to remind you that you seem to have been alone with the victim when he died? Mr. Vlado here saw him walk out on the pier ahead of you."

"There was a fisherman at the end." She gestured toward the body and the slouched stick-figure dummy. Dominick had paused in his film-

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ing, holding the camera against his striped T-shirt while he changed the video cartridge.

"Where is he now?" Inspector Drexell asked.

They gazed into the water together and Michael could see a flatfish gliding a few feet down near the stony bottom. Katie Blackthorn didn't answer. Instead she said, "I went to the hospital this morning to see that injured orderly, Isaacson. He wasn't there. He'd been released."

Drexell nodded. "They kept him overnight but his lungs seemed all right. Having his head out the door saved his life."

"I need to interview him."

"Before either of you leave, I want the name of that Traveler, Mr. Vlado."

"Dane Morgan. He's with his grandfather, an old man named Granza Djuric. They may have already left Starkworth."

"We'll find him."

Drexell started to turn away but Katie reminded him, "What about Isaacson? Where is he now?"

"At the command post we've set up on the top floor of the hotel. I believe Colonel Jugger is questioning him on behalf of the European Union."

She shouted out to her cameraman, "Keep filming. I'll meet you back at the hotel." An ambulance crew had arrived to remove the body when the police finished. At the shore end of the pier uniformed police were keeping back the crowd.

They reached the hotel a little before noon. Without Drexell along, Michael doubted they'd be allowed to interview the massacre's sole survivor, but Colonel Jugger arranged that. "He knows nothing, really, but you're welcome to do an interview if he's willing."

Carl Isaacson was seated in a chair in one of the top-floor meeting rooms. His breathing was still a little raspy but he showed a vast improvement over the previous day. "You're the one who was with Colonel Jugger yesterday," he said, rising to shake Michael's hand. "I don't know how I survived that terrible thing."

Katie Blackthorn immediately took over the interview. "What was it like in there when the gas started seeping through the ducts? Did you know what was happening?"

"Not at first. I heard some of the Gypsies starting to cough and choke. Then I saw Mrs. Withers, one of the volunteers, collapse on the floor. That's when I realized something was wrong. I ran to call for help and collapsed in the doorway."

"Do you have any idea who might have done this?"

"It had to be a terrorist," Isaacson told them. "Or a madman. It doesn't make much difference, does it?"

Someone turned on a television set and they saw the turmoil on the road north of town. The motorcade carrying the Prince of Wales was approaching, with television crews jockeying for the best positions.

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"He'll come to the nursing home," Katie decided. "That's where it happened." She called Dominick again on her cell phone and told him to get there with his camera. Jugger hurried outside to join the welcoming committee.

When Dominick arrived he handed her the tapes he'd shot in the town square and at the pier, then hurried out to join the others. "Do you have to get these tapes back to London?" Michael asked. The world of television news was a long way from his farm in Romania.

"No, no. We transmit them by satellite from our news van directly to the studio. Whatever we're shooting now will be on the evening news, and I'll do a live commentary to accompany it."

Before he could say anything else, a line of black Rolls Royce limousines came into view. Bodyguards jumped out first, crowding around the central vehicle in the motorcade. Michael caught a glimpse of Colonel Jugger shaking the prince's hand as the cameras rolled.

"I'd better get out there," Katie said.

He stayed watching at the hotel window as the official party went down the street to the nursing home and stood before the building for more pictures. The entire visit meant very little from a practical point of view, but Michael was nevertheless grateful that the nation was officially acknowledging the enormity of the crime. Starkworth and what happened here would be remembered.

It was later in the afternoon, when the prince had completed his visit, that Inspector Drexell returned. Michael knew he was back as soon as Dane Morgan entered the hotel, accompanied by his grandfather. "So you found them," he said to Drexell.

"It wasn't difficult," the Scotland Yard man told him. "You get to know the ways of these Travelers after a time."

"Have you arrested them?"

"Dane Morgan is assisting with our inquiries."

"I've done nothing wrong," young Morgan insisted. "And neither has my grandfather. Why would we kill our own people?"

"Because they weren't your people," the inspector pointed out. "They were Gypsies from Eastern Europe, coming to take over the land that had always been yours."

"Not quite. My grandfather came from the same area sixty years ago."

There was more activity in the command post as several of the inspector's men returned from another mission. He stepped out briefly to speak with them and then returned with Colonel Jugger trailing behind. "Where is Miss Blackthorn?" he asked, glancing around.

"Out in the news van reviewing the tapes she's transmitting to London," Michael told him.

"Good! This isn't ready for the press yet." He led Michael and the colonel aside, out of earshot of Dane and his grandfather. "London is demanding fast action and I think we have something. This fellow Cubberth, the one who was killed on the pier this morning—my men

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searched his house and found a small laboratory, just as Dane Morgan said. There were containers full of cyanide pellets and acid, just like the ones used at the nursing home. Cubberth's our man. He may have cut his own throat on the pier this morning."

"Then how would you explain the coat and hat on the stick? And why would he ask Katie to meet him if he was going to kill himself without making some sort of statement first?"

"What do you think happened?" Drexell asked, obviously anxious for some sort of quick resolution to the case. "Do you think she's involved?"

"I don't know. I think Cubberth supplied the chemicals to someone and that person used them. Then Cubberth was killed so he wouldn't talk to the press. Once he saw what had happened with his chemicals, he wanted a way out for himself."

More news was coming in and Drexell hurried off in answer to a summons. Michael went downstairs in search of Katie's news van. The street between the hotel and the nursing home seemed to have grown a stand of trees during the day. Five vans were parked in a row. Their transmitting towers had been raised toward the heavens, seeking out satellites that would carry their pictures to London and beyond.

He found Katie Blackthorn's van and peered inside. "Come in," she told him. "I've had great news. We're providing the feed for one of the big American networks!"

"Sounds good. What does it mean?"

"I'll be on the telly in America, on their evening news. Here, look at this tape!" The segment started with a close-up of Katie, setting the scene. Then it cut to the center of town and the bell tower of the town hall. "He has some great footage here. Watch this." At the stroke of noon, as the bells started ringing, a flock of birds took off from the tower, spiraling skyward. Then the scene shifted back to Katie, standing in front of the old nursing home. "That idyllic scene was shattered yesterday by an event that is already being dubbed the Starkworth Atrocity—the death by poison gas of fifty-three Gypsy immigrants and two volunteer aides." She went on to run through the day's events, including the unsolved murder of a local resident on the town's pier. There was tape of the police at the pier and Cubberth's body being removed. Then there was the arrival of the Prince of Wales, with footage of his remarks.

"This is the short version for America," she explained. "It runs fifty seconds, which is all they can use. My London station will use lots more, of course. They'll pick up a live feed from me in an hour." The thing had become a media event. It was a matter of airtime rather than the deaths of all those people.

Her cameraman opened the door and called to Katie, "Something's up! The inspector just came back again with some others. They were moving fast."

She flipped off the switch on her video monitor. "Let's go."

Michael followed along as she broke into a run, followed by Dominick

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and his camera. There did seem to be some unusual activity at the hotel, and when they reached the elevator a Scotland Yard man with a clipboard blocked their paths. "Sorry, only authorized personnel allowed on the top floor. The dining room is closed this evening."

"I'm Michael Vlado, with Colonel Jugger."

"Katie Blackthorn, and this is my cameraman, Dominick Withers. We're both on your list."

The man smiled slightly. "Not on this list. No press allowed. You can go up, Mr. Vlado."

"Michael!" she called after him. "I'll wait for you in the bar!"

The elevator doors closed on him and he was whisked to the fifth floor. He entered the familiar conference rooms being used by the Scotland Yard investigators. Colonel Jugger and Inspector Drexell were seated across the desk from each other. "Michael, my friend," Jugger began.

"What's happened? What's going on?"

"We have a serious situation here," Drexell announced. "Some important information has reached us regarding a possible new suspect."

"Do you mean the Traveler, Dane Morgan?"

"No, I mean Colonel Jugger."

The shock went through Michael like an electric current. "That's impossible! We were together every minute of the journey. At the time of the killings we would have been still in France, or just starting through your Chunnel."

"Please hear me out," the inspector said. "The facts we have uncovered are quite shocking. Colonel Jugger was born in Germany during the final days of World War Two. After the war his father was tried as a war criminal. The charges against him involved the gassing of hundreds of Gypsies at Auschwitz. He was convicted and given a life sentence, later commuted for health reasons. He was released from prison in nineteen seventy-one and died a year later. Is that correct, Colonel?"

"It is correct," Jugger answered in a subdued voice. "Are the sins of the fathers to be visited on their sons?"

"After what happened to your father, you may have nursed a growing hatred for Gypsies."

"On the contrary, I have devoted my life to erasing my father's terrible crime."

"But that crime was committed with the same weapon we see here at Starkworth. It seems like more than a coincidence."

Michael had to interrupt. "How could he have been in two places at once, Inspector? I told you—"

"I think we're agreed that Cubberth prepared the necessary chemicals at the urging, or in the employ, of someone else. Otherwise there'd be no reason for silencing him. Suppose we take that a step further. Perhaps he was paid to supply the chemicals and use them on the Gyp-

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sies at the nursing home. If Colonel Jugger paid him and arrived after the killings, he was truly above suspicion."

"If, if!" Michael hit the desk with his fist. "You have no proof for any of this!"

"We have the physical evidence from Cubberth's house. With a bit more searching I think we'll turn up the name of the person who hired him."

It was a corner conference room and Michael walked to the wide windows to stare out at the rolling sea, his mind in turmoil. Then, in the other direction, he could see dusk beginning to gather at the center of Starkworth. It was late now, and there were no birds visible on the town-hall bell tower.

Michael turned and walked back to the table. "Get the press up here and I'll tell you who killed them all—the fifty-five people and Mr. Cubberth. I'll tell you why too."

Inspector Drexell resisted at first. It was obvious he was not about to release information to the press until he knew what it was. Finally Michael went off in a corner with him and talked for twenty minutes. Drexell sighed and stood up. "All right," he agreed. "We'll try it."

Within a half-hour the upstairs conference room was crowded with journalists and video cameras. By this time a shroud of darkness was draped over Starkworth and the windows toward the sea showed only the room's reflected lights.

Drexell stepped to the battery of microphones. "I'm pleased to introduce Mr. Michael Vlado, a representative of the European Union, who was present with Colonel Jugger when the atrocity was discovered yesterday afternoon. Mr. Vlado has been working closely with Scotland Yard on its investigation and has provided a theory involving the person responsible for this terrible crime. I'll let Mr. Vlado explain it in his own words."

Michael stepped to the microphones, glancing toward Katie Blackthorn in the first row of journalists. Colonel Jugger had gathered some of the others connected with the case too, and was just ushering Dane Morgan and his grandfather Granza into the room. One of the officers had brought Carl Isaacson, the tragedy's sole survivor, up to the room too.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, you must excuse my English, which is not always perfect," Michael told them. "I come from a remote farming village in Romania, and I have a deep and abiding interest in truth, justice, and brotherhood. I am myself a Gypsy, the king of my small tribe, but I have worked with the Romanian police and others in solving a number of crimes in the past. When I came here yesterday with Colonel Jugger to examine the problem of Gypsy immigrants, I never imagined I would find the horror that awaited us at the nursing home."

Katie raised her hand with a question, but Michael said the time for

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questions would come later. "We all have questions, and perhaps the greatest is how anyone could commit such a terrible crime. It is reminiscent of the worst atrocities of the Second World War, when Jews and Gypsies at Auschwitz were gassed in this manner. That was our first question. Was this the work of a terrorist or a madman?

"A madman needs no rational motive, while for a terrorist the killings could have been a way of discouraging other Gypsy immigrants said to be on their way here.

"From my viewpoint, the first break in this case came earlier today when a local man named Cubberth was murdered on the town pier. I'd learned earlier that Cubberth was making LSD and other chemicals at a laboratory in his home, selling these things to local Travelers and others. Inspector Drexell's men found evidence at Cubberth's house that he had put together the chemicals responsible for the deaths of these fifty-five people. The killer had no doubt paid him to do it."

This time Katie couldn't be silenced. "How did you know Cubberth wasn't the killer himself?" she called out.

Michael sighed and answered. "Because he called you to arrange a meeting at the pier this morning. What was he going to tell you? That he'd killed all those people? More likely he was going to supply knowledge of the crime, and the person behind it. This was confirmed to some extent when Cubberth himself was murdered at the end of the pier as you came to meet him."

"But what happened to the killer?"

"His disappearance was really quite simple. The prop coat and hat shielded him from view. Cubberth walked out there, thinking it might be you seated there. The killer slit his throat and then simply slipped off the end of the pier into the water as you walked toward him. I noticed the water was only a few feet deep, and the killer simply walked back to shore beneath the pier. Your eyes were on Cubberth and that dummy coat and hat, and you never saw him. The same was true of me, as I followed you out there. The killer made his escape, but this murder provided the first clue I needed to his identity."

"He left no clues," Katie argued. It had become a dialogue between the two of them, recorded by the world's press.

"Think back. How did the killer know Cubberth would be at the pier? Cubberth would hardly have told him, and I saw Cubberth myself walking onto the pier. The killer was already in place at the end, so he hadn't followed his victim there. No, the killer must have known of the proposed meeting in advance. I was present when Cubberth called you after breakfast on your cell phone, just as you finished interviewing me. You didn't tell me what it was about, but you mentioned Cubberth's name and the time and place of the meeting. That was all the killer needed to hear."

"But no one else was there," she argued. "There were just the two of us!"

Michael shook his head. "There was one other person. Your cameraman, Dominick."

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As Michael uttered the words, Dominick stopped filming and dropped his camera. Every eye in the room was suddenly on him. "This is madness!" he rasped out angrily.

"Is it? The killer would have been soaking wet after wading ashore beneath that pier. You were wearing a rock-group T-shirt at breakfast but when Katie summoned you to the pier later to film the murder scene you'd changed to a striped T-shirt."

He moistened his lips and moved forward a few steps. Behind him, Katie Blackthorn knelt silently to retrieve his camera. She hoisted it to her shoulder and started filming. "I wasn't at the pier till after she called," Dominick said. "I was in the square shooting footage of the town-hall tower. You can look at the tape."

"I did," Michael told him. "You shot it exactly at noon, with a flight of birds frightened by the tolling bells. A fine picture, but it proves you were there almost an hour after the murder, not while Cubberth was being killed."

His face had gone white, and Inspector Drexell started toward him. "Why would I do such an insane thing?" he asked, as if he couldn't quite understand it himself.

"I can't explain it exactly," Michael said. "But it wasn't the Gypsies, was it? They were only a cover for your true motive, the sort of motive that might make some men blow up an airliner to kill just one person on it. A little while ago, when the officer stopped us at the door, Katie gave your name as Dominick Withers. One of the volunteers killed by the gas was a Mrs. Withers. Who was she? Your wife or ex-wife, perhaps?"

It was one revelation too many for him. Before Drexell or the others could move, he uttered a long scream and launched himself at the window overlooking the sea.

Katie Blackthorn caught it all on videotape, but in the end her station decided it would have been bad taste to show the suicide of a station employee on the evening news. She went back to London the following morning, and Colonel Jugger came to meet Michael for breakfast.

"It was his mother, not his ex-wife," he told Michael. "I suppose we'll never know any more than that. He lived in Maidstone, halfway to London, so it was easy for him to drive down here in a half-hour and set off Cubberth's gas at the nursing home."

"What now?" Michael asked, thinking about Katie Blackthorn.

"There's another boatload of Gypsies crossing the channel. They land at Dover in less than an hour."

Michael finished his coffee. "Let's go." ●

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Blues for Julie and Diz

by Michael C. Norton

I was standing at the coffin, minding my own business, when Detroit Homicide Detective Vincent DeGarmo tags my shoulder, half spins me to face him.

"DeGarmo. Such a pleasure to see you." I waxed sarcastic, talking out of the side of my mouth like I'd seen good old Boston Blackie do so many times on the TV screens of my black-and-white youth. "You paying your respects to my pal Dizzy Joe Lester?"

"Didn't know the poor slob, Dyer. But from what I've heard, he could cut you in a sax showdown in the first five notes." DeGarmo pushed up the knot on his already perfect money-green tie.

Bay City, Michigan resident Michael C. Norton writes of what he knows in portraying the Michigan music scene, for he was for many years a musician himself, playing jazz drums before turning to his second love—literature. The author is now a part-time faculty member in the department of English Literature at Delta College and also manages the college bookstore. He is the author of two horror novels, and of one previous story in this colorful series. †

"If I thought you capable of even the smallest appreciation of jazz sax, I'd be wounded. I admit Diz was special, but I can hold my own since I quit the sauce."

"YOU quit drinking? Does the liquor commission know? The state's gonna have to raise the damn sin tax or the schools will shut down!"

The detective and I had a tenuous, antagonistic relationship at the best of times. "Step off, DeGarmo, or get to the point."

He ran a flat, broad hand over his crewcut. "I'm here to do you a favor, Mr. Scotty Dyer."

I grabbed the lapels of my beat-up tweed sports jacket, squared it on my less-than-square shoulders. "I doubt there are any favors you can do me. I'm doing fine. I've even got a steady gig now that I'm off the sauce."

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DeGarmo laughed, a dirty little chuckling creature moving in his throat. "I'm a for-real cop, remember Dyer? Not a booze-sotted, has-been saxman who likes to pretend he's some TV super-sleuth. Your steady gig consists of you backing a girl singer with a pickup band in a Roseville American Legion Hall on Saturday nights. You clear two C-notes a week." He moved in close, his chiseled face inches from mine. "What I know, you'd pay a month's take to hear."

"I'm on pins and needles, Detective," I said.

His hand, near the casket, made an eloquent gesture toward my departed friend, poor old, stiff old Dizzy Joe Lester, whose burnished ebony face suddenly seemed to be smiling knowingly up at the ceiling.

"Diz? What about him? He had a freakin' heart attack."

"No, he didn't. He OD'ed."

DeGarmo was smoothing Diz's lapel, like he cared, which I figured he didn't. I slapped his hand away. "Give me a break, man! Diz didn't use drugs, didn't even drink or smoke. He lived for his music."

"Dyer, the coroner says the tox level on this guy was something to behold."

I blinked at DeGarmo, rubbed at the stubble of my jazz beard, looked down at Diz again, who just lay there, and smiled, smiled, smiled. "And you're telling me this because . . . ?"

"Because my captain doesn't think it's important enough to sacrifice manpower on it, and I do. Not enough to use up my free time, but I figured since he was your friend . . . well, that's the favor. Somebody ought to find out what's going down, and since you've got this thing about crime and detection . . ."

"And this falls to me because Diz had chemicals in his blood you couldn't recognize? You ever consider he may have just drunk too much Detroit tap water?"

"Not funny, Dyer. And your friend was not alone. He came into County Hospital with vital signs off the charts. That triggered the drug screen, but he croaked before they could get the breakdown back from pathology. Guy in the path lab thought the compounds looked familiar, checked his records. Same chemicals, in astronomical dosages, in a number of other stiffs, all within a few months: a young lawyer from a big downtown firm, a million-dollar-club real-estate lady, a stock analyst, and fifteen—count 'em, Dyer—fifteen musicians of varying ages, most of them jazz players like Diz, like you."

"Tell me: What kinda drugs, if not crack, coke, et cetera?"

"Mood elevators, Dyer, ain't that something? Like Prozac or Zoloft—except different."

"You're tellin' me my friend Diz happy-ed himself to death?"

"I wish I knew. But my captain's tied my hands. Only you can find out."

Three A.M. found me in my Cass Corridor flat communing with Fred, my sax, the faithful companion who's seen the highs and lows of my life,

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and helped me express them to others. Right now, Fred was talkin' blues. The BLUES, with capital letters. Blues for Diz, a mentor, a friend. A role model, fallen. The fact that he had such chops, such great musical imagination, without the use of drugs was almost unheard of. Fred was telling 'bout Coltrane, Bird, Lester "Prez" Young. Miles. Krupa. Zoot. The list of users and abusers was longer than the one that named the clean ones, and even they were heavy alkies for the most part. Which had been my drug of choice, living on The Cass, this stretch of hell between Tiger Stadium and the Renaissance Center, Michigan Avenue north to eternity. Fred the sax told me alcohol had made my hands shake, robbed me of the dexterity and facility being a good jazz saxman demanded. Some of it was coming back since I'd met Julie, but it was too slow. Fred said be patient, but when Julie wasn't near me, it was hard to remember why I wanted to go to the trouble. And now, my booze-free, drug-free role model, Diz, was fallen, dead because of drugs. It made it even harder to remember why, why, why I was trying to be straight.

Fred reminded me: for Julie Paris, the girl singer with the smoky voice, an angel's face, and a body that looked just too damned fine in a sparkly sheath dress under blue-red stage lights. The girl singer who had helped me come up out of the bottle with the whisper of a sentence. "Scotty," she had said, "you're too good to waste it this way." That simple. She helped me past the worst of it, held me in her arms, a mewling lost soul, then got me the gig backing her up.

We had a practice scheduled, Julie, me, Fred, and the band, for five P.M. I couldn't wait. I knew I couldn't sleep, so I decided to hit the bars, the after-hours joints, the blind pigs that dot Detroit like loud, raucous measles. Not to drink, no, but to go dig out the truth about Diz.

Downtown Detroit is next to deserted at three A.M. A few homeless folk trying to catch some sleep between rousts by the boys in blue. Cops and urban nomads, that's about it.

The blind pig known as Papa John's—because it was owned and operated by Papa John—was a block off Grand Circus, second floor, above a wig shop and a used-record store. Just a knocked-out joint, open space and tables, a "beat" bar—a place where people could get high after other bars closed, a place to do the slap and tickle to dirty R & B, or lose your butt gambling at poker and dice.

Papa John's face had Nigerian blackness, pure Africanness without white-devil taint. It was almost four A.M. when I made my way into his blind pig. The crowd was sparse, a salt-and-pepper mix, uptowns and downtowns with a few suburbanites thrown in.

"Whatchoo need, Scotty-man?" Papa John growled from behind the bar. His veined eyes glinted in the bare bulb near the ancient filigreed, hand-crank cash register.

"Info, John, 'bout Diz. You weren't at his funeral."

Papa John shrugged huge shoulders. "No relation of mine. Liked his sax better'n him, you know?"

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"But you knew him. He gambled here regularly."

"Still no call to go to his funeral."

"Guess not. Forget that. Not my point, anyway."

"Then get to it, dawn's coming, and I got thirsty customers."

"You knew him well enough to know if he was a stoner. Diz was my friend. I thought he was a straight arrow. Cops and chemists say different. Tell me what you know, Papa, okay? For Diz?"

Papa shrugged. "He was straight. Then a few days ago, he told me he had a line on becoming the best saxman ever. Seemed nervous, cranked. I asked him if he was doing the drug thing, you know. He laughed. Said his drugs came from a doctor, an' they were gonna make him look to Coltrane like God to Baby Jesus. He took his sax out of the case and blew tenor like human ears ain't never heard before. Then two days later, he dead, Scotty-man. You figure it. That's all I know."

"But he said a doctor gave him the stuff?"

"That's what he said."

"Who?"

"Dr. Everett Blaine, of Grosse Isle: Detroit Yacht Club, board of directors of the Cranbrook Institute, acquisitions advisor for the Detroit Institute of Art, on and on, Scotty-man, like the society columns say."

"Damn."

There was no way I was going to get to see a muckety-muck like Dr. Everett Blaine of blah, blah, and blah, so I was stuck on the lead from Papa John. I let the slow dawn sun push me to Millinery Square, to the posh downtown townhouse of one Julie Paris, my heroine, my goddess of booze-free salvation. She was beautiful, even at seven A.M.

I, on the other hand, must not have looked my spiffy best. I knew this because her pretty little jaw dropped three feet when she saw me at her door.

"Dark circles again, Scotty! What have you been doing?" she mothered, ushering me into the clean-smelling morning brightness of her living room, the room of a nonsmoker, a nondrinker, and as near as I could tell, a non-sinner in the classic sense.

"Late night, is all. Diz's funeral. Took it harder than I thought."

"Well, I guess!" Her doe-eyes darted over me, beacons of worry. She was trying so hard to make a man out of me, and I wasn't cooperating. "You get out of those clothes, take a long, hot bath, and then get some sleep. I'll wake you when it's time for our practice. Okay, Scotty-babe?"

"Sure," I agreed. It was easy to agree with Julie.

I couldn't get the idea of Dizzy Joe Lester doing drugs out of my head the whole practice, even though I had the music I loved, played on Fred, the sax I loved, behind the smoky voice of Julie, the woman I loved. Diz was dead, same as eighteen other folks. What could I do, how could I help? I'd grown up watching TV detectives; why couldn't I think of some cutesy, TV-script-like answer that would wrap it up?

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"I'm waiting, Scotty. Do you have a light or not?" Julie. Cigarette between soft red lips, quirky smile at the corners of a generous mouth.

"Sorry. Dead brain cells of an ex-alky." I flipped open the Zippo from my pocket, lit one for her and another for myself. Her one vice, so far as I knew: She smoked at gigs and practices only. A controlled addiction.

She absently twirled a new-penny-colored curl of hair on her forehead while soft eyes watched smoke spiral up to the flat-black ceiling rafters. "So what's up, Scotty? I'm trying to help you, but if you keep your troubles all locked up in here—" she laid a flattened palm on the heartbeat in my chest—"I can't help at all, now can I?"

"No. No, I guess you can't. But I'm not sure this is something you want to know about. Or should know about, if I could or wanted to tell."

She shook her head, penny-bright curls dancing, lilting little-girl laugh. "What are you talking about? That made no sense."

"That's just the way it is with me sometimes. You ought to know that by now." If there was anybody who could help me with this, it sure wasn't squeaky-clean Julie Paris. Maybe the drummer. Drummers are incredibly savvy about what's hip and what isn't. If there was some new drug fad on the streets, maybe our drummer would have a line on it.

His name was Tommy Ryan. I caught up with him later at the no-name bar I used to frequent as a heavy boozer. Now I just went there out of habit; there were no expectations at this bar. A door on a corner of The Cass, a door to darkness and alcohol-blunted desperation for its habitues.

Ryan was young, somewhere between eighteen and middle-aged—it was difficult to nail down. Not really an "X-er," or "Slacker," as the media liked to label his generation. He seemed trapped between the baby boomers of the sixties and the Cybernet addicts of the nineties. He was drinking Canada Dry as if it were a quadruple scotch. I gestured to the barkeep to bring me the same. I sat down and Ryan acknowledged my presence with only a slight tip of the rim of his dirty glass.

"Say, Tommy."

"Back at you, Scotty."

"What's up?"

"Same old. What can I say?"

The barkeep brought my pale ginger ale and waved away my groping for cash.

This wasn't going to be easy. "Did you know Diz? The saxman who just died?"

"By rep, mostly. I never caught his act. I hear that's my loss. People say he was freakin' good."

"People are right about that. But I hear he was into some sort of drug thing."

Tommy shrugged. His eyes rolled back as he swilled ginger ale.

"Antidepressants. Some new kick. Massive quantities."

Tommy nodded. "It's going 'round. People say if you hit this side of OD with 'em, sometimes you get better."

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"Better?"

"Yeah. At whatever you do. Makes corporate execs real go-getters. College students pull four-point averages. People say it gives musicians chops you never dreamed possible. Average trumpet men blow like Miles, average sax dudes play like Coltrane, Hawkins or Stitt. Drummers can do the Buddy Rich thing. That's what people say."

"People say that, but can *you* say that?"

His eyes rolled, he drained the glass, shrugged. "Tried it. Made me jumpy, made the sticks slippery. Didn't sleep for a week. Massive damn headaches, man. So I laid off. Figure if I'm meant to be a mediocre jazz drummer, so be it."

"How'd you get the stuff, Tommy? Isn't it hard to get?"

"Your average street pusher don't handle it. But psychiatrists get free samples by the truckload. Somebody gave me a name, I went to see him, told 'im I was, like, majorly depressed, and I left his office with all the tiny plastic bottles I could stuff in my pockets and carry in two hands."

"And the doc's name was . . . ?"

"Blaine. Dr. Everett Blaine. But he didn't give me a 'scrip. I woulda had to go back for that. Way that stuff made me feel, I wasn't going back."

I stood, drank my ginger ale dry on the way up, set the glass on the chipped and water-ringed formica table. "Tommy, what did you do with the leftover drugs you got from Blaine?"

He looked up at me with a steady gaze, swiping long blondish hair out of his eyes with a rock-steady hand. "Gave it all to our lady of the sacred song, dude. Gave it all to Julie Paris."

That night at the Legion Hall in Roseville, it was hard. When Julie walked in with that in-charge strut, long legs swishing open the slit in her ankle-length, red-glittery sheath, high heels clicking confidently across the polished checkerboard vinyl-asbestos toward the stage, it was all I could do to keep from grabbing her, shaking her, asking her just why the hell she was taking mood-altering drugs for recreation. How the hell could she, after dragging me bodily out of a Jim Beam bottle?

But I didn't. I reached down and helped her up on the stage. Were her eyes a bit too bright, was she a bit too pumped? Had there been a tremor in her too-warm hand? Before I could reach any conclusions, she whirled to the mike, counted off a hot tempo, and began belting a fast bluesy rendition of "I Got a Right to Sing the Blues." Tommy Ryan fell right in, and for a while, it was just her and him before us older guys got the tempo and caught the chorus. It sounded like we had planned it that way, and the crowd, stiff as it was at the Legion Hall, applauded at the end as if Billie Holiday had been miraculously resurrected, backed by one of Duke Ellington's small combo units. I was even feeling pretty proud of myself until she turned from the mike and whispered: "A little off on the second solo, lover. Can you pick it up a bit?"

Crucial: I was crushed. She walked back, pointy toes of her spike heels nosed up to the front skin of Tommy's bass drum, and snapped off

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an even quicker intro. Tommy beat it on his sticks and mouthed, "'The Man I Love'" to the rest of us. Particularly to me. We did a version close to what Illinois Jacquet laid down in the classic Jimmy Smith set at Newport in New York in '72. That meant I was up first with a long-winded, wild, honking double chorus. Miffed about Julie, I was hardly up for it, but I did my best. When she picked up the quickly articulated vocal riff into the bridge, there was a frown line for me between her perfect brows. Sorry, Julie love.

It was a long night. We shared a cab back to Millinery Square, wordless.

Inside, in the too-bright light of her kitchen, she tossed her glittery red clutch purse on the bar and sashayed out of the room, taking pins out of the French twist, letting her coppery hair fall free.

I opened the purse. Inside were three plastic bottles. Samples. Xanax, Depakote, Zoloft. I lined them up like good little soldiers on the breakfast bar. When she came back into the room, hair loose about her shoulders, dressed only in a jade-green silk wrapper, I simply gestured at the parade-dress line of mood elevators, mind alterers. Gestured grandly—accusing and questioning simultaneously.

She blanched.

"So you know. If I explain, you won't get it. And even if you do, you'll still think I cheated you. I made you stop destroying yourself with alcohol, but here I am a druggie. Well, you'd just better go."

"I don't want to. I can't. I have to hear it."

She bit her full lower lip, looking from me to the bottles and back again. Then she turned away, leaving the white kitchen light. She returned, a black book in her hand. Julie laid it carefully before me, hands trembling more than a little.

"Open it. Pick a page. Read."

I did as she instructed. I wished I hadn't.

"Zoloft today, as the doctor instructed. Still couldn't keep the voices—all mine—out of my head. Jumbled and confused. Knew I had to get out, like the doctor said: only way to overcome anxiety and agoraphobia is to confront it. Went out in the courtyard, but was constantly aware someone might see me, watch me, know I was crazy. Started walking in circles, faster and faster, smaller and smaller circles, couldn't stop! Came back inside, took a Xanax. Thirty minutes later, I slept. Woke only to take more of each drug. Couldn't look at myself in the mirror as I swallowed them: When I see that frightened face, all I can think is, if only these drugs keep me going from minute to minute, maybe it's time to think about not going on."

Julie paced the white kitchen as I flipped to new pages.

"Can't go out at all now, not even to the courtyard, I know they're all watching, waiting for me to lose control. I can't lose control! Zoloft made me worse, so now I'm waiting for it to wash out of my system, as the doctor says, so I can try the Depakote. So I sleep. But of course, if I sleep so much during the day, at night—God! How I fear the night. Even the TV scares me. Isn't that silly? But the people in the commercials are too

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falsely happy, the characters in the comedies too unaware that the things they mock are deadly serious problems for people like me . . ."

I flipped another page.

"A new respect for the word crazy. How many times a day do people use the word? Don't they realize? Not only must I fight the demons in my own head, I have to pretend to ignore all these idiocies from other people. Insane, crazy, raving mad. If they had any idea how these words cut to the heart of people with real mental and emotional problems, would they stop?"

One more page.

"The demon was back today, the demon of fear. The only way past the demon is work. I painted the entire condo in thirty-six hours, nonstop, moving the furniture around like a longshoreman, working till all my muscles trembled, until I couldn't move. Sleep came, and the demon was gone. For today."

I stopped reading and closed the book. I couldn't look right at her, afraid of what I might see in her pretty eyes, the eyes she made me see out of as she helped me stop drinking. Now I knew her vision had been forced, something she concocted out of her own pain, just to help me. If this lady didn't love me more than life itself, there was no meaning to that four-letter word at all.

"I . . . I've had these problems all my life, with my emotions. My parents said I was high-strung. They said I was too self-involved, only considering my own needs. That wasn't true, Scotty, I just couldn't get past the demon. I was always afraid of other people, unfamiliar places, situations I couldn't script out in my head in advance. Oh, I knew I was crazy. Crazy! But it's only recently that doctor's have decided many emotional and mental sicknesses are caused by chemical imbalances in the brain that drugs can help re-balance. And that's why I have the drugs."

"But if a doctor finally diagnosed you, found the drugs that would do the do, why no 'scrips?"

She laughed, a nervous little sound. "You think I can afford this place on the money I make at the gigs? My dear daddy pays for it. But doctors and drugs for a chemical imbalance? Do you know what these drugs cost? A hundred, hundred fifty a month, minimum. No way would Daddy pay. His generation is only a step removed from locking mental cases in an attic for life!"

I found a way to meet her pretty eyes. They weren't so pretty now. Scared, man, just scared.

"No insurance?"

"No. Nothing. So I got free samples from Dr. Blaine."

Now that name stopped me cold. Chilly. And then it got worse.

"At least I *did*, until even he said I couldn't have any more free stuff. Then his supplier, some pharmaceutical guy from Flat Rock named Abe Jacobstein, called me on the phone when I stopped going to Blaine. He only charges me about ten dollars a month for the stuff. It seems a little

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stronger, and sometimes I get a little woozy, like maybe the dosages are off, but it's still better than not having the drugs at all."

"This is not good news, doll. Let me tell you why." I told her all I knew, about good old Diz, about DeGarmo stepping off and leaving me, junior shamus of the month, to find out about the drugs that were killing people.

The fear magnified in her pretty eyes and she rushed to me, fell to the floor clutching arms around my legs, begging me not to let her die. No one had ever needed me, not ever, but sweet Julie needed me now. I knew what I had to do.

It took some work. I contacted a physician's assistant I knew only as Johnny K. He worked The Cass on his own time, whenever he was off duty from the Jefferson Avenue clinic where he put in sixteen-hour days, six, seven days a week. His was the only medical attention some of the street people on The Cass ever got, even if he was seeing them illegally.

He met me by the water, and we talked, as the murky Detroit River lapped against its concrete banks next to the Renaissance Center at the night-deserted Hart Plaza.

"Even sample bottles have batch-code numbers on them from the manufacturer. So you can check your lady friend's bottles for stamped numbers on the bottom, and the cops ought to be able to track them to the pharmaceutical house that gave them to Blaine. My bet is they all went through Jacobstein's house, but the contents—well, they're obviously not kosher." He pushed up his John Lennon moon glasses. "Street dope dealers don't touch these kinds of drugs because they're dirt cheap."

"That's not what Julie says, man."

"Well, most of these drugs are manufactured for pennies, then marked up big-time to the pharmaceutical houses, who take a markup before they sell to pharmacies, where the maximum retail prices are determined by insurance-company co-pays. So the big money goes to the manufacturers, who justify the costs by calling it marketing outlays. Read that as free samples to doctors. The distribution houses keep records of samples. The doctors are only really accountable for the prescriptions they write, since the FDA doesn't have enough field agents to keep close tabs. Even so, psychiatrists aren't gonna chance an audit 'cause they can lose their license if caught without their records up to date. Because of the nature of this 'free samples to doctors' game, the pharmaceutical houses are sometimes more difficult to track."

"So, man, I'm lost. If the good Dr. Blaine isn't the instrument of death for the eighteen stiffs, who is?"

"Your ladyfriend said the drugs she's getting from Jacobstein differ in dosage. Jacobstein, back in the sixties, was a chemistry major at U. of M., same time I was there, before Uncle Sam said my grades weren't good enough to keep me out of a prepaid trip to 'Nam. Abe was a follower of Dr. Tim Leary. You know, tune in, turn on, drop out? Jacobstein was busted for cooking LSD on a large scale. And unlike some of

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the other chemists of that era who gave their product away as a part of the glorious flower-power revolution, he sold his for a sizeable profit."

"How does a guy busted for that manage to become legit a few decades later?"

"The FDA can't cover everything."

I lit a cigarette, the only drug I still allowed myself, since Julie. I was trying to piece it all together, and my P.A. friend waited patiently. "So this Jacobstein guy has found some way to make a profit on drugs too relatively inexpensive for the usual street pusher to make money on."

"Considering this guy's past, he's probably brewing his own brand of antidepressants in a home lab, substituting the fakes for the real drugs. Not to the doctors, but to the patients, through direct contact somehow." He checked his watch. "I've got to get back, Scotty. Sorry I couldn't help you more. But if this guy is home-brewing things, and the molecular chains are a bit off, or they dissolve too quickly . . . there's a whole range of things that can make any drug potentially lethal."

"And . . . my Julie is sucking down these home-brewed drugs?"

"That would be my guess, Dyer."

Sometimes I'm slow, slow, slow, man, from the brain cells I murdered with bourbon all those years, but one thing was crystal. Julie wasn't a recreational drug user, and not even like Diz, a musician seeking peak performance, sharpening her acumen with overdoses of mood-elevating drugs. She needed 'em to function. To kill the demon. How many other people in society would be better off with a good shrink and drugs to kill the demon? Not a question I was qualified to answer. But also irrelevant. My job now was to get to the bottom of this so that I could help my sweet Julie, just as she'd helped me.

The cab ride to Flat Rock broke me. Not even enough left to tip the driver, who pulled away squealing tires, cursing in whatever language was native to him.

Jacobstein's address was a cinder-block building with high windows all around, blacked out by a sloppy paint job. I circled it: a locked door in front, a locked door in the back alley, another much bigger cinder-block building on the opposite side of the alley, a door opposite the back door of the smaller building.

It was the pit of night's belly in Flat Rock and hard to see. I had come right from my meeting with Johnny K., having decided it was time for action, no matter how misguided. I was a private citizen playing detective: Warrants and sound reasoning meant nothing to me. And given my shaky past, neither did breaking and entering.

I forced the alley door on the back side of the smaller building. I flipped on the lights, not caring if I was discovered in my little felony.

An office, in a disarray that suggested massive disorganization. I looked at scraps of paper, discovering nothing. In the midst of the jumble sat an enormous computer.

I am not conversant with the electronic revolution; I'm still the owner

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of a cherry acoustic tenor sax, not some hopped-up amplified piece of—Well, I believe my position on music and electronics is apparent, man. Nor do I have skill one when it comes to computers. Luckily, this one was on, the little cursor-thingy flashing. I punched the Enter key a few times, past menus, finding one titled "Contact Files," and whose name should appear at the top but good old Doc Blaine's. Tapping the sum total of my computer knowledge, I hit a key that said Scroll, and got an eyeful. The list would have been more meaningful to DeGarmo, the county coroner, or that dork who writes the society column for the *Free Press*, but even a musician like myself could recognize a few names. Like Diz. And Julie.

I was seething over the discovery, back of my neck getting hot, when a ring of icy steel halted that sensation.

"What the hell are you doing in my computer files?" a voice behind the ring of metal asked, none too friendly.

"Mr. Jacobstein, I presume," I said without turning.

The pressure of the steel circle at the base of my skull increased. "I oughta blow your brains out, right now."

"Not a good business move, dude. And the way I see it, you are a businessman, right? Profit above all else."

"I can say you were a burglar, here to steal drugs, a dangerous junkie, and I feared for my life. Justifiable homicide."

"Maybe. But then the cops might stumble on this file, might want to look into some of your more unexplainable distribution deals, don't you think?"

"Not if I do you in the factory instead of my office. Let's take a little trip across the alley. Over to where a dangerous junkie would more likely be scrounging for drugs."

"Won't work, Jacobstein. I haven't got the particulars mapped out, but there's some scam you have going with switching the real sample drugs, out of the sample bottles, with some half-assed home concoctions that you are not too particular about when it comes to dosage accuracy."

"You're a real smart boy, aren't you? Come on, move!" Hands yanked me out of the chair, forced me to the rear door, shoved me out into the dank night air, across the alley. In the darkness, the hand not holding the enormous Magnum fumbled with keys, but not long enough for me to run. The one overhead mercury-vapor light showed me little of my captor other than a tall, narrow frame and wisping white hair on a balding head. The factory was blacker than the night by many degrees, as Jacobstein shoved me inside. I stumbled over boxes, heard pill bottles crush and clatter and roll away like mice on tiny little rollerblades. I used the darkness blindly, rose and ran.

"You son of a—!" Jacobstein's voice rang out, loud, then the Magnum spoke, louder. A streak of super-heated air whined at my left ear. I dove into cardboard cartons, more mice skated away on the ice of a new day, actually little pills in little plastic bottles, but in the dark, imagination can make anything out of anything.

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I could hear Jacobstein crashing around, like me, and I wondered crazily why he didn't just turn on the lights. After all, he had the gun; I was just a scared-ass saxman stumbling in the dark.

Like a kid in bed who suddenly becomes aware, knows for sure, that those monsters he has always imagined living under the bed are real, I became aware that there was something big and breathing right next to me.

Then Jacobstein found the breaker box. Lights blazed, and I leaped away from the panting creature near me, a yelp of fear escaping my lips. Jacobstein's Magnum exploded, a cold fist shattering my left shoulder, and the monster next to me roared. Across the warehouse expanse of boxed and bottled drugs, Jacobstein collapsed with a shriek.

I rolled over to meet my final doom at the hands of the panting monster, and DeGarmo stood there, the barrel of his Glock ten-millimeter smoking from the single shot that had leveled Jacobstein.

"You okay, Dyer? Good thing I didn't trust you to get through this without me keeping an eye on you. You know you're bleeding, you jerk."

"I still don't understand why," Julie said.

My shoulder hurt like hell: not surprising with a .44-Magnum hole in it, but Johnny K. said it would heal . . . at least ninety percent or so. I adjusted my position in my sweet Julie's arms. "My friend Johnny beat the medical grapevine and came up with most of the info. Dr. Blaine didn't know what Jacobstein was up to until he noticed many of his patients weren't coming back for scheduled appointments. He moaned about it when Jacobstein was in for one of his sales visits. Jacobstein hinted that the doc's patients might be getting help elsewhere. The doc didn't get the picture. Jacobstein began needling the doc about partnering with him, asking for large infusions of cash to convert Jacobstein's distribution house into a lab. Remember, most profit in prescription drugs goes to manufacturing labs. The doc said no. So Jacobstein devised this plan of manufacturing knock-off drugs, substituting them in the sample bottles, giving the real drugs to Blaine in Baggies. He accessed the doc's computer files by hacking the Internet, got the doc's list of patients, contacted them directly, offered them drugs for a fraction of the cost, no need for pesky office visits.

"Jacobstein knew the drugs were badly made, even knew they were possibly lethal. This not only did not bother Jacobstein, it struck him as a way to further strong-arm Blaine. Particularly when people began croaking from the drugs in sample bottles batch-numbered as being distributed to Blaine, according to Jacobstein's records. Even before the cops could make the connection to Blaine via the patient list, or the batch numbers on the sample bottles, Jacobstein was at Blaine's doorstep, pushing hard, threatening, blackmailing."

I could feel Julie's shudder. The movement made my shattered clavicle feel like a live electrode stirring in a bowl of gritty mush. I ignored

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the pain, turned in her arms enough to reach up and kiss her lips. Her eyes were pretty again, if now more sadly vulnerable.

Just like all those old times when I lived on the desolate, crying-out-with-pain Cass Corridor, I still often find myself down by the Detroit River, Hart Plaza, day or night, rain, smoke, smog, or shine, playing solo riffs on Fred, my sax, my faithful companion. Talking through him about the pain and death and suffering . . . and now, sometimes, the joy—now that I've moved in with Julie. I helped her find a caring shrink, one who has helped her get the medication she needs. Daddy is helping with the costs, though I'm sure he still doesn't approve or acknowledge that his daughter needs medication to keep her brain straight. Julie gets what she needs from her doc, her singing, and me, but what she and the world of people like her need most is understanding, man. A change in attitude. Like that dude Thoreau said, lives of quiet desperation. It doesn't have to be like that. Fred the sax just wailed out a solid arpeggio to the gulls and the lapping night river that says a change is gonna come. Especially for me and my sweet Julie. ●

A WEEK EXCUSE FOR MURDER

by Rob Loughran

A mother hated the woman
who married her only SUN.

The wife, spoiled and fat,
spent all her husband's MONey.

Bill collectors appeared,
arriving in ones and TUES.

That's when Mother decided to remove
that burden her son had WED.

Mother contrived a kitchen accident
that would fool the auTHURities:

When wifey plugged in the griddle,
she, not the bacon, did FRI.

But so did Mother; convicted,
in the electric chair she SAT.

Poem©1998 Rob Loughran

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Getting Things Done

by Jan Gleiter

With two well-reviewed novels to her credit, 1997's *Lie Down with Dogs* and this year's *A House by the Side of the Road* (both from St. Martin's Press), Jan Gleiter is carving out a niche for herself in the mystery world. Although her last two stories for *EQMM* have both been true whodunits, each has been told from an unusual point of view. We think she'll fool you with this one; it's full of unexpected twists!

Being a secretary, I may not get a lunch break until noon is no more than a dim memory, but at least I always get one, which is more than I can say for my boss, Walter Prescott. A few weeks ago, I returned from a late lunch in the park (and a lovely lunch it was: chicken salad with grapes, which I'd brought from home and eaten in the sunshine of an April afternoon) and found the office in an uproar. Two police officers had come, interrupted a meeting of the department heads, and told my boss, the company president, that his wife was dead.

Mr. Prescott had turned pale (according to Louise, from Accounting) and nearly fainted. He had left immediately, his face now gray (according to Phil, from the mail room), and that was all anyone knew. That was *not* all anyone suspected.

"I'll bet she was murdered," said Lucy, the receptionist. "She was just about asking to be murdered."

Nobody at the company had much liked Mrs. Prescott, who was considerably younger than her husband and beautiful. It wasn't her youth we disliked, or her looks. It was her habit of taking too much for granted. Our resentment hadn't been tempered by rumors that she was spending an inordinate amount of time with her very handsome tennis instructor. (I'd seen them together once and, had I been in her place, I'd have chosen Mr. P, but that's neither here nor there.) We all liked Mr. P and felt protective of him as regards Mrs. P but he'd always seemed fond of her, so I'd guessed she was more charming than we knew. As recently as the evening before, he had appeared quite the devoted husband. Several of us had been invited to dinner, and the Prescotts had gotten along just fine.

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"That is more than enough of *that!*" said Helen Trudeau, from behind Lucy's desk. As VP for Development, she was, in Mr. P's absence, the boss—a role she always slid into with no apparent effort. Despite her unquestionable skill at running things, I hoped Mr. P would not be gone for a long time. I knew his vagaries, preferences, style. Ms. Trudeau was more of a mystery. Her sternness about gossip was, however, to be expected, and Lucy blushed with embarrassment at being caught.

Ms. T was dressed in her typical, buttoned-down, professional way—a far cry from the low-cut number she'd worn to dinner the night before—but she was still a knockout. One wouldn't have guessed from looking at those smoky, long-lashed eyes that she was harder than nails in every way that counts in the world of business, but she was. I knew, because every time Mr. P was away, she took me over as well as his office.

I spent the rest of the day doing what Ms. T told me to do instead of straightening the files, which is what I'd planned. I hate straightening files, so I didn't mind putting it off, but taking dictation from Ms. T was an adventure I could always live happily without. One memo was to Mr. P himself:

"I am cognizant of the imperative nature of my rigorously maintaining company policies and procedures pending your return. I will use all necessary measures to assure the continuation of timely transactions and will swiftly relate, if circumstances so necessitate, any instances of staff failures to execute your expressed and/or understood wishes as communicated by me."

Had Mr. P actually expressed any wishes? I doubted it, but my pencil had been racing and there it was—on paper.

"Type that up, give it to me for signature, take it to the copy machine, make me one copy, and leave the original in the machine," she said.

I had never been able to figure out why Ms. T took such roundabout ways of doing things. Still, I have to admit, she got them done. The entire staff would shortly be aware of just what a firm hand she had on the tiller.

The next morning, the police arrived almost as soon as the doors were unlocked and requested an interview with Ms. T. Actually, they only pretended to request it; they made it clear that they expected to talk with her immediately. I buzzed her and showed the officers in, noticing that Ms. T was decked out in a smashing tweed suit of a gray that did marvelous things for her eyes. I shut the door very firmly. But before releasing the knob, I gave it a teensy little push so it sprang back open an inch or two. Then I sat at my desk, put on my reading glasses, and pretended to work on some papers while I listened to the conversation.

I almost gave myself away with a gasp when the police announced that Mr. P had been arrested, but I got my hand up over my mouth in time. Ms. T sounded not only shocked, but outraged. According to her, if

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Mrs. P was killed at about one-thirty the preceding day, as they said, then Mr. P could not possibly have been involved. She herself, so she said, had been having lunch with him not long before then. Yes, of course they had been seen. No, they hadn't returned together. She'd had an errand to run; he'd said he was going for a walk; they'd parted. But (and here she lost some of her cold efficiency) *anyone* who knew *anything* about Mr. P and what a saint he'd been year after year no matter *how* his wife provoked him would know that the mere suggestion that he had *murdered* her was preposterous!

Provoked him how? they wanted to know. Ms. T backtracked immediately, but it was too late. She stammered a bit in efforts to deflect suspicion from Mr. P to the sources of provocation. The cook Mrs. P had hired, at great expense, was a likely suspect. She might have been stealing from the Prescotts and been caught in the act.

No, said the police. The cook was the one who discovered the body when she arrived for work at two o'clock.

That proved nothing, insisted Ms. T. I could practically see her bridle, throwing her head back so that her silky blond hair almost cascaded out of its chignon.

Much as I would have liked to believe in the murderous-cook theory, I didn't. When she'd brought the torte in for Mrs. P to apportion the night before, she'd seemed a jolly and unobjectionable sort. "You know what they say about a moment on the lips," she'd remarked, plunking the dessert in front of Mrs. P. Her employer had, it was true, seemed put out by this informality and had drawn back with a huffy, "I do not believe I will serve, Mabel," but that scarcely seemed an adequate motive for violence.

I was mentally eliminating the cook as a suspect when Ms. T came up with a few better ones. There was the ne'er-do-well brother, whom Mrs. P had thought deserved an executive position at his brother-in-law's firm. Or how about the tennis instructor, whom Ms. T had seen at an outdoor cafe with Mrs. P, just a week ago? If the police couldn't figure out who the murderer was, then she, Helen Trudeau, would be happy to do it for them. I imagined her nostrils flaring as she threw down the gauntlet.

There was silence for a moment, and then I had to smother another gasp, because Ms. T actually said, "*I* would be bright enough to consider his secretary, who has had an eye on Walter Prescott for decades and who took quite a late lunch yesterday."

Much as I appreciated her spirited defense of Mr. P, and hopeful as I was that she might actually discover the real perpetrator, suspecting me was not, I thought, very nice. The idea that the eye I kept on Mr. P had a salacious glint in it was both untrue and, to my mind, indelicate. Besides, decades was a low blow. I may have passed my prime, but her implication that I had entered an advanced stage of life was inaccurate.

I was simultaneously offended and unnerved, and my brain started whirling frantically. Was anyone else at the firm suffering from the

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same misapprehension as Ms. T? And, from a practical point of view, had anyone seen me in the park?

Indicative of my emotional conflict was the fact that the next statement from the police actually made me feel relieved, but just for the moment it took affection to triumph over self-interest.

"Ms. Trudeau," said a deep voice. "We have the murder weapon. It's a knife from the Prescotts' kitchen, and it has Mr. Prescott's fingerprints on it. It also has blood of Mrs. Prescott's type on it, and it matches the depth and nature of the wound exactly. It was discovered last night, in a dumpster half a block down the alley from their home."

The phone rang, making me jump and, unfortunately, sounding loudly enough in Ms. T's office for her to realize the door was ajar. The next thing I knew, it had been closed all the way, and that would be the end of what I'd be able to hear.

The voice on the line was familiar, but I didn't recognize it, even when the man gave his name. "Charlie here," he said. "I need to talk to you. Can you get away?"

I was a little stiff. "Charlie? Perhaps I should know who you are, but I do not."

He laughed, embarrassed. "Oh, gosh! Sorry! Charlie Potter. Patricia Prescott's brother. In Marketing."

I agreed to meet him at a coffee shop around the corner. I left a note on my desk. "Back in twenty minutes," it said. No further explanation. *Decades* indeed!

Charlie Potter was a wreck. Elegantly dressed, as always, but a wreck. He had circles under his eyes, his tie was crooked, and he'd cut his chin while shaving.

"The police came by at midnight," he said. "They arrested Walter!"

"My goodness," I said noncommittally. "Was he at your house?"

Charlie waved a hand. "No, no, of course not. I was at Patricia's house. I mean, his house."

"It's dreadful," I said. "And ridiculous."

Charlie nodded vigorously. "I *know!* But you must be able to give him an alibi. You always know where he is, what he's doing. Have the police talked to you yet?"

I shook my head. I wasn't sure what, if anything, to tell him. I sipped carefully at my coffee while I thought. He took too large a swallow and grimaced. "Look," he said, "you know he didn't do it. Not Walter."

"Of course he didn't," I said, with more confidence than I felt just then. My understanding of fingerprints is that they are, well, incontrovertible. "But what do you want from me?"

He laughed nervously. "Why, nothing," he said, "except the truth. Just tell the police what you're sure is the truth."

"And why wouldn't I?" I asked, frostily.

"But you would!" he said. "It's just that, if you didn't happen to be able to provide a definite alibi for Walter by stating what you *know* to

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be facts, well, perhaps you might provide one by stating what you are *convinced* are facts."

It took me a moment to take this in. "You mean, make up an alibi?" I asked. "Say he was in his office when he wasn't?"

"Look," said Charlie, "you know he didn't murder Patsy."

Actually, though I didn't say so, that was something I was feeling less sure of all the time. Charlie Potter, it appeared, didn't realize that the murder weapon had been found, or he wouldn't have thought my lying would do any good.

I stood up, stretching to the limits of my less than considerable height so I would have as far to look down as possible. "Goodbye, Mr. Potter," I said.

Five seconds after I arrived back at my desk, Ms. T buzzed me. I went into her office with my steno pad at the ready, but she had a new method of torture in mind.

"You are, I believe," she said, "a secretary. I could look up your job description, but I am reasonably sure I know what it says, and I do not think it mentions your taking twenty-minute breaks whenever the fancy strikes you."

I didn't reply. Silence fit my purposes as well as anything. I gazed at her, thinking about something I'd read recently—that Cro Magnons were skeletally identical to modern humans. "Dress one up in a suit," it said, "and you couldn't tell the difference." That, I thought, would explain a lot.

She looked angrily at me. I looked placidly at her. Then she sighed.

"Look, Richard," she said. "I need help! Running this place is *hard*. This awful situation is so unnerving, so horrid, so . . ." And then, to my amazement and extreme discomfiture, she began to cry. I really can't stand to see people cry. I was, however, still annoyed.

"There, there, *Helen,*" I said. "There, there. No one expects you to do as good a job as Mr. Prescott."

In the days that followed, everyone tended to gather in clumps. Groups of us took coffee breaks together, ate lunch together, waited for the bus together. Even the management-level people seemed cozier than usual. We all felt confused and insecure, and there seemed to be safety in numbers. Everyone had heard about the knife in the dumpster and, though there was no further news of any importance, the situation was a topic of constant conjecture. Ms. T went back to calling me Mr. Andrews and I went back to calling her Ms. Trudeau. I would find stacks of work with detailed instructions on my desk. My dictaphone always had letters on it for me to type up (while cringing). I often ran through the capacity of my personal note recorder with reminders to myself about what to get done when. But we had little personal contact except when she called me in to her office to tell me which restaurants to make reservations at that week, where to pick up her dry cleaning, and what photographer to schedule for the shots of her that would appear in Allied's annual report.

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I did my work as best I could under the circumstances, though it wasn't easy. Mr. P was out on bail, but he didn't come near the firm. Ms. T moved her potted plants and silver-framed photos into his office, and it gradually lost its identification with Mr. P entirely. I, however, was not willing to see him disappear permanently from Allied Enterprises. One afternoon, I decided to pay him a visit.

I had to go out anyway, to pick up the photos of Ms. T so she could choose the one that did the best job of making her look both competent and ravishing. It was close to five o'clock by the time I could get away, so I didn't come back to the office, but headed over to Mr. P's.

He answered the door himself, looking a good ten years older than he had just a few short weeks before. He brightened a bit when he saw me.

"Richard!" he said. Mr. P can call me Richard anytime he chooses, having spent years earning the right. "This is a pretty kettle of fish, wouldn't you say?"

I sat myself down on an antique something or other and dove in. "Mr. Prescott," I said, "something has to be done. Did you kill Mrs. Prescott?"

He looked at me and laughed. "Ah, Richard. I should have known you'd be direct. No, I did not kill Mrs. Prescott."

"Then we absolutely must figure out who did." I was speaking no more than the God's truth. I wouldn't survive many more of Helen Trudeau's dictated memos, and I doubted that Mr. P would survive a trial.

"You don't go along with the official theory?" he asked. "After all, my fingerprints are on the murder weapon."

"Oh, pish!" I said. "You didn't do it, so somebody else did. Now, who? How about Charlie Potter?"

"I wondered about that," he replied. "But why? He doesn't inherit from Patsy; I do. That's only fair, I guess, since it was all mine to start with."

I told him about Charlie's efforts to get me to lie to the police—which, I should mention, I hadn't done. "Now that," I said, "is suspicious."

Mr. P smiled again. "Not really. Poor Charlie. His new advertising campaign is based on shots of the company president demonstrating interest and competence, on site, in Allied's branch offices and plants from Paris to Pago Pago. Charlie was all set up for three weeks with a camera crew and me. Now he's facing three weeks with a camera crew and Helen Trudeau."

"Ah," I said. So that was it. I was surprised it hadn't been his throat he'd cut while shaving. "Well, then, how about Helen Trudeau? She might have had it in for Patricia."

He shook his head. "Motive, Richard, motive. What was her motive?"

"She's in love with you," I said. "She certainly tried her best to get the police interested in some other suspect." I told him what I'd overheard.

"Well, I'm flattered," he said. "But, believe me, Helen Trudeau has never been in love. She's certainly not in love with me."

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I wasn't so sure. She had been sitting, as the most important guest would, on his right during dinner and I'd noticed her leaning in his direction. This, however, was hardly proof of anything, and Mr. P's tone had been adamant.

"Fine," I said. "Charlie had no motive; Ms. T had no motive. Who did? Who had a reason to want to get rid of Mrs. P? How about the cook?" I liked the cook, but *somebody* did it. "How about her? I notice she's not here."

"Of course she's not here," he said. "What use could one person possibly have for a cook? I haven't exactly been entertaining large groups of people. What's her motive, Richard? She disliked her job but didn't have the nerve to quit?"

I sighed. I could think of only one more person. I didn't want to bring up the tennis coach, but I steeled myself.

"Uh," I said. "I've heard some rumors about Mrs. P and her tennis coach. . . ."

Mr. P threw me a horrified look. "You think Patsy and her tennis coach were having an *affair?* And maybe it went sour?"

I looked prim. "I didn't say that." (Of course, it was what I'd been thinking.)

"But her tennis coach is *gay!*" he said. "Couldn't you *tell?*"

This flustered me. Usually I can tell. "I only saw the man once," I said. "And I wasn't the only one who couldn't tell. Besides, that doesn't mean he isn't a murderer."

"Maybe not. But it does mean he wasn't having an affair with Patsy. So, why would he kill her?"

That's what we kept coming back to. Why? And, even if we could answer that, then how?

I don't know if I would ever have figured it out if it weren't for my wife. When I turned down the covers that night, I noticed the pillowcases. They were beautiful. Hand embroidered and made of cotton so fine and smooth, it felt like satin.

"Wherever did these come from?" I asked. "You haven't taken up needlework, have you? Where are you hiding your embroidery hoop?"

Sandra laughed. "No, silly!" she said. "Some old lady with a lot of time made them, probably about thirty years ago. They're from the AmVets Thrift Store."

I dropped the pillow I had been rubbing against my cheek. "You mean *other people* have put their heads on these?"

She laughed again. "Uh huh. Just like in hotels and motels and inns and on overnight trains. Why, if it weren't for detergent and washing machines, there might be something to be concerned about. But, you know, Richard, people can wash things."

She grinned wickedly. "Now, get in bed."

I abandoned my resistance to the pillowcases. She was right. People can wash things and she had. Besides, when Sandra tells me to get in bed in that tone of voice . . .

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Then, of course, I was distracted for a while, but before drifting off an idea started to form in my mind, and sometime during the night all the little bits and pieces came together. They must have, because when I woke up, I knew precisely what had happened. Therefore, I also knew precisely what to do.

I got to the office a bit late. I marched directly to Ms. T's door, knocked sharply, and opened it.

She took a dramatic look at her watch and lifted one eyebrow: "Yes?"

"I was at Mr. Prescott's yesterday," I said. "We talked about a lot of things, including the dinner party. This morning, I couldn't decide whether to go to the police station or come to work, but I decided—at least for today—to come to work. I'd like an extremely large raise."

I set my briefcase on her desk. "Look," I said, demonstrating with exasperation. "The clasps don't work smoothly, and it isn't even made out of real leather. And I've got my eye on a truly fetching little Mercedes. Yes, the raise will have to be sizeable."

She frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Sizeable," I said firmly. "Or I will feel it necessary to tell the police about your stealing a lovely damask napkin from the Prescotts' home."

"Stealing a . . ." She gaped at me.

"Lovely damask napkin," I said. "It was peeking out of your purse—your sweet little beaded purse. The one that was carrying more than an evening bag is meant to carry."

I had noticed the purse because it looked almost exactly like the one Sandra had been carrying. Sandra had gotten hers at AmVets. Ms. T, I was sure, hadn't. I had not noticed a damask napkin peeking out of it, but Ms. T couldn't know that.

I regarded her and smiled conspiratorially. She decided to brazen it out.

"I had not cared for the candied fruit in the torte," she said crisply. "I got rid of it the way one is supposed to—in my napkin. I didn't want to offend the cook, so I took the napkin away with me to wash and iron and return at a later date. I intended to confess to accidentally carrying it off. Now, if you would like to tell the police about this, you go right ahead. I very much doubt that they'll be interested."

She turned away and took a stack of folders off the credenza behind her. "There is a lot of work to be done today," she said coldly, rising to her feet and putting a hand on one lovely hip. "I suggest you start on it."

"Oh, I would, I would," I said. "Except that I'm just so confused! See, I keep wondering why Mr. Prescott would take the knife he had just used to stab his wife to death all the way out to a dumpster half a block away."

She was no longer pretending shock at the suggestion that Mr. P had, indeed, done the foul deed. "To get rid of it, of course," she said, frowning at me again. If she kept this up, her perfect brow was going to develop unfortunate little lines. "He didn't have time to hide it better."

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"Why hide it at all?" I asked. *"Why not wash it?"*

She stared at me.

"Why not wash it?" I asked her. "And then dry it? And then put it back in the drawer with all the other knives? The blood would be gone. His fingerprints would be gone." I shrugged. "Not that they'd matter on a knife in his own kitchen."

Ms. T sank back into her chair.

"You see, the only evidence the police have is those fingerprints. But what they really prove is that Mr. P did *not* murder his wife. Unless he's incredibly stupid. And Mr. P," I said, "is not stupid."

She blinked slowly. Her voice was like ice. "Whatever is your point?"

"I'm getting to that," I said. "Mr. P cut the torte that night, after his wife was snotty about it. You were sitting right next to him. You dropped your napkin over the knife he used, picked it up, and put it in your purse. If anyone had noticed the knife missing from the table, so what? You wouldn't use it. But no one did. So the next day, you returned to the house—realizing that Mr. P's plan to take a walk provided the perfect opportunity for your 'errand'—and killed Mrs. Prescott with the same knife, carefully keeping the napkin around the handle that still bore Walter Prescott's prints. No, you didn't have a motive to kill Patricia, but your real victim wasn't Patricia. It was Walter."

She tried to laugh, but the noise she made didn't qualify. "That's absurd! You could never prove that!"

"Oh, really?" I asked. "There's a lady who lives in the house closest to the dumpster. She does a lot of gardening in her backyard. Especially in the early spring. Especially in the early afternoon in the early spring. Her Yorkshire terrier barks at everyone who walks down that alley. Don't you remember being barked at by a Yorkshire terrier?"

Ms. T was staring at me and a muscle under her left eye began to twitch.

I continued. "I'm so sorry I was late today, but this lady—her name is Pearl Carruthers, Mrs. Pearl Carruthers—was telling me the most fascinating things about *Campanula persicifolia*." I sighed. "It made me just long for a yard. Oh, and can you guess what she said when I asked if she recognized a photo of you?"

I didn't wait for a reply. What Mrs. C had said, over the hysterical barking of one of the most obnoxious examples of canine life I've ever met, was, "My goodness! My eyes are so bad, I really can't see farther than that flowering crab—certainly not all the way to the dumpster, dear!"

I went blithely on. "Of course, Mrs. Pearl Carruthers doesn't know—yet—why I was showing the photograph to her at all. Now, if that's not good enough, I believe the police will find your fingerprints on the edge of the dumpster, where you grabbed it to steady yourself while you put the knife just far enough under the edge of something to make it look as if it had been hastily hidden."

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Her mouth opened and shut. "No," she said. "I never touched the dumpster. Never touched it! I was much too careful to touch it!"

"Walter Prescott said you've never been in love," I said. "But you are. You're in love with Allied Enterprises. You just had to have it, didn't you?"

For the second time, she started to cry. On this occasion, however, it did not surprise me. "I would never have gotten control," she said. "Never! Walter Prescott is only fifty-eight. I had to get rid of him. He'd have run this place forever! It didn't matter that I was better at it, didn't matter that I'm the only one around here who knows how to get things done!"

"But in such a roundabout way," I said, shaking my head sadly. "In *such* a roundabout way!"

She pulled herself together and asked me what would qualify as a big enough raise.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "I think I'd rather just have my old boss back."

That started her off again, but she calmed down before the police arrived. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought her indignation was completely sincere. They took her in for "questioning." They won't be able to hold her long without something more concrete than my suspicions. But then, it won't take long to finish typing up the conversation that's on my personal note recorder. I'm especially going to like transcribing Ms. T's statement about being "the only one around here who knows how to get things done." ●

STAINLESS STEAL

by Mark Grenier

An immaculate thief known as Gene
Drove his car through the car-wash machine.
When the washing was done,
He presented a gun,
Robbed the owner, and got away—clean.

Poem©1998 Mark Grenier

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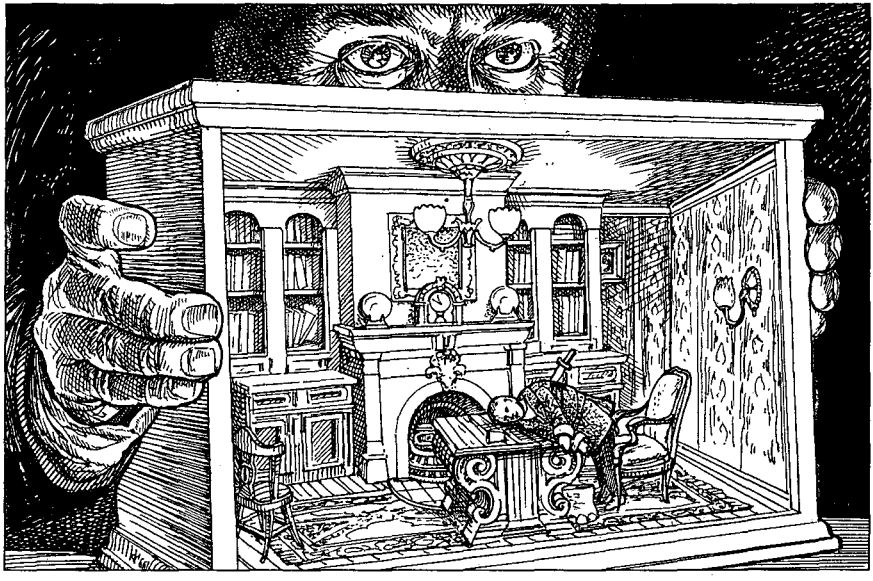

Art by Allen Davis

THE COLOSSUS OF LILLIPUT

by James Powell

Somewhere in the early morning darkness a clock struck three. "Okay," said M. M. Q. Contreras, sitting on the edge of her desk, "maybe Billy G. wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. But he was your friend."

"I only kept that double-crosser around to run errands," said Dockerty, nodding approval as she crossed her shapely legs.

"Like sending him to me with that cock-and-bull story about people stealing your precious antique clock?"

The crooked judge shrugged. "You can't prove insurance fraud. Not unless you find the clock. Which you won't. With Billy G. dead, I'm the only one who knows where it's stashed."

He lowered his voice and took a step toward her. "Look, I was in to Anselmo Zangari for a bundle betting the ponies and he was leaning pretty heavy. I was paying him off with the insurance money when I spotted Billy G. across the street, pretending to be winding his pocket

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watch. I know blackmail when I smell it. So I ducked out of the shop at the back and followed until Billy G. turned into an alley. When he stopped to check his watch I came up behind and gave him the working end of my knife. Then I ground the watch under my heel to establish the time of his death and scrounged up some friends who'll swear I was with them when the deed was done."

Contreras laughed her hard private-investigatrix laugh. "You just don't get it, do you?" she said. "Anselmo Zangari, mob enforcer, tries to pass himself off as legit. Zangari's Clock Repair and Cleaning, right? And he likes his little joke, does Anselmo. Remember the sign over his shop, the painted clock face and the words 'Let Anselmo clean your clock real good'?"

"So?" demanded Dockerty.

"So Billy G. was always late. When I called him on it he blamed his cheap pocket watch. But the real truth is he came by Zangari's shop every morning to reset his watch."

"So?" repeated Dockerty, moving closer.

"So, like I said, it's a painted clock. It always says ten after ten. Which sure puts a hole in your alibi. Unless I explain things to the police. Which I won't."

With the roar of a man who'd more than met his match, Dockerty drew his knife and lunged. But the savvy private investigatrix jammed a stiletto heel into the man's left kneecap. He dropped like a stone and lay moaning and thrashing on the floor.

Contreras started to dial the police. Then, unsure of the legality of clamming up about Billy G.'s watch, she decided to call her lawyer first. When Narcissa's sleepy voice came on the line Contreras smiled. "Yo, Shystress, did I wake you up?"

The three neon letters from the Virbitski School of the Dance sign outside her office window flashed, "TSK-TSK, TSK-TSK."

Polly MacDougal printed the final draft of "The Neon Reproach," her latest children's mystery story, and took it out front to the antiques shop. With tax time drawing nigh, her husband Wallis was working on the books while tending the store, a slight man dwarfed by the immense unsaleable bookcase and drop-front writing desk combination they now used as a desk/display case.

"James Powell ranks with Edward D. Hoch among contemporary mystery writers, and among the best of all time," said William DeAndrea in *Encyclopedia Mysteriosa*. "Powell's stories are crisp, well told, and always surprising." Like Edward D. Hoch, James Powell has made his career with the short story, not the novel, and has developed several popular series that have run in *EQMM* since the 1960s. ✝

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Polly laid the story by his elbow as he muttered over his addition. She did not expect Wallis would like it. He preferred her detectives male, like H. H. Hopp, the rabbit private eye, or Humbert Bugg, B.A., the riddle-solving grasshopper. But she valued his opinion, nonetheless.

Then she threaded her large body through the antique clutter to the display window and began the overdue job of taking down the small Christmas tree. As she wrapped each wooden icicle, spun-glass moon, celluloid santa, and tin angel in tissue paper, she put it away in the pigeonholed decoration box.

Snow was falling again in the midafternoon gloom. White Swan had recently experienced three heavy snowstorms. As Polly watched the slanting and thickening flakes, a figure in a well-cut gray overcoat and a maroon hound's-tooth deerstalker came up the narrow trench the Claggett boy had dug for them. The man walked between the three-foot-high piles of snow, holding a large canvas carryall in front of him like a bass drum.

A moment later the street door opened and the man backed into the shop. "Mr. MacDougal?" he asked and, turning around, carefully set the carryall down on the floor.

Polly watched as Wallis eyed the man cautiously. Had he come to buy or sell? The new arrival appeared to be in his fifties, cheeks plump and red from the weather, eyes bright and frank, and manner grave. "My name is Charles Kern," he said, turning to include Polly in his words. "Dr. Muir at Simon Cameron University suggested I place a certain matter before you."

Polly's pulse quickened. Angus Muir had joined the faculty there a year or so before Wallis retired. He was a devotee of detective fiction and an admirer of her husband's skill as a solver of mysteries. It sounded like a case. And Polly, weary of playing Watson to her husband's Holmes, had resolved that on the next one she and Wallis would work together as equal partners.

Inviting the man to take off his coat, Wallis introduced his wife. Kern bowed to Polly. "Delighted, dear lady." Shedding his coat and scarf but keeping the deerstalker, he added, "My nephew subscribes to *Hard-boiled Humpty Magazine.* He's a real fan of yours, Mrs. MacDougal. Wait till I tell him we met."

"Tell him you got two detectives for the price of one," smiled Polly.

Wallis shot her a worried look before putting the shop ledger away and offering Kern one of a pair of kitchen Windsor chairs with original paint priced at $325. His worry increased when Polly marched over, sat in the other chair, and gave Kern her full attention.

"Where to begin, where to begin?" wondered Kern out loud. "Are you familiar with miniature rooms? Not dollhouses, just single rooms."

"The kind you find in museums?" asked Wallis. "A French Empire salon, a Queen Anne dining room, done to a scale of one inch to the foot. That sort of thing?"

"Actually I meant something more modest," said Kern. "Something

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for the average hobbyist to put together. Their growing popularity may be a sign of the times. Our shrinking apartments are too small for dollhouses. Enter the miniature room."

Kern tapped his own chest. "And enter Murders in Miniature. I design and manufacture small scenes of the crime, scenes of famous murders. Julius Caesar being assassinated in the Senate, Macbeth killing Duncan, Sweeney Todd in his barbershop with his next victim in the chair and the tiny little bottles of bay rum on the shelf behind him, Lizzie Borden with her miniature axe, et cetera. The hobbyist can buy my plans and specifications, or a kit containing everything needed to put the room together for himself.

"I'm branching out into scenes of fictional crimes," Kern continued, "a field where Dr. Muir has considerable expertise." He leaned forward confidentially. "Actually I hope he'll find us a nice, juicy Highland murder or two to begin with. My Macbeth scene of the crime has never sold well and I've got bolts of mini-plaid cloth all over the place."

As he spoke, Kern drew two magnifying glasses from his jacket, passing one to Wallis and the other to Polly. "With each kit we will include a hand-glass and a deerstalker's cap." From the carryall he brought out the mate to the cap he was wearing. "I'd've brought two if I'd known you were going to be here, Mrs. MacDougal," he said apologetically, offering the cap to Wallis. But Wallis had a thing about looking ridiculous to no purpose and waved the cap away. He regretted this at once when Polly, seeing Kern's disappointment, intercepted the cap, took a deep breath, and put it on.

Thanking her with a smile, Kern said, "Here, this'll show you what I'm talking about." With their permission he brought down six volumes from a set of the works of Elbert Hubbard from the left bookcase and placed them in two piles of three each on the drop-front desk. Removing a dark rectangular box about a foot and a half long, a foot high, and a foot deep from the carryall, he set it at Polly's eye level atop the books. Then, gently and apologetically, he wheeled Wallis and his office chair over beside his wife. Finally, Kern took a sheepshank of electrical cord from the back of the box and inserted the plug into the nearest electrical outlet.

Through the framed sheet of glass that formed the front of the box Polly saw a small, brightly lit room, a Victorian study. Three walls covered with a red and cream wallpaper in a lozenge pattern that rose up to high plaster moldings and a complicated plaster medallion from which hung a decorated gas chandelier. A white marble fireplace stood against the far wall with a merry fire in the grate. Its mantel held a heavy ormolu clock and above it, in a gilt frame, a tiny Landseer-like painting of stags. High bookcases stood on either side, and several chairs upholstered in deep blue. A large red Bokara rug covered the floor. In the center of the room was an elaborately carved, marble-topped table and beside it an elephant's-foot wastebasket.

But the room's overall look of solidity and correctness was marred by

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the figure of a man in a brocade dressing gown seated at the table with the upper part of his body thrown across the marble tabletop. Around the jeweled hilt of a small knife that protruded from the figure's back was a small pool of what seemed to be fresh blood.

Leaning forward together, the MacDougals bumped heads. They backed off and, more cautiously, examined the murder scene through their hand-glasses.

From the clock on the mantel, the dressing gown, and the overturned nightcap glass on the table, Polly concluded the murder had occurred just before 11:53 in the evening.

"It's all wonderfully done," said Wallis. "Isn't that a Belter table?"

Kern nodded proudly and drew a ballpoint pen from his pocket to use as a pointer. "Those upholstered chairs are Belters, too. I'm a bit of a collector."

"But I sure don't recognize the murder," admitted Polly.

"I'm not surprised," said Kern. "It's a murder that hasn't happened yet. One, I trust, that never will. You see, the little figure there is supposed to be me. This room is a replica of my study back in Brooklyn Heights. The murder weapon in my back is the letter opener I kept on the table. It disappeared two weeks ago, along with my cat."

He turned to Wallis. "And, as you said, the workmanship is museum quality. My Murders in Miniature are much humbler efforts. In my Julius Caesar scene I've even stooped to using cake dividers for columns."

"Those thingees they use to separate the layers on wedding cakes?" asked Polly.

With a nod Kern continued his confession. "Young Queen Victoria's portrait on Sweeney Todd's wall is a trimmed and framed penny postage stamp and, if the truth be known, Lizzie Borden's axes come from a manufacturer of holiday charms for bracelets. They're supposed to represent George Washington's birthday."

"Quite terrible, of course," said Wallis drily. "But hardly a reason for murder."

Kern bowed his agreement and added, "No, this room isn't one of mine. It arrived in yesterday's mail. Since I was coming to see Dr. Muir, I brought it along to show you."

"No message? No return address?" asked Wallis.

"Oh, I know who sent it," said Kern. "His name is Frederick Chapman, and he bestrides the world of dollhouses and miniature furniture like a colossus."

"Doesn't everybody?" asked Polly.

Kern gave her a stern look. "Chapman's miniature furniture sells for thousands and you won't find a complete room for under fifty thousand," he said, perhaps hoping prices would set the conversation back in a more serious direction. "Chapman and I used to meet now and then at conventions and trade shows. He is a large, dark, brooding man. Two things seemed to drive his engine: perfection in his craftsmanship and

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the desire for money. When I first knew him he talked crackpot stuff, like alchemy and magic and selling his soul to the devil for a team of tiny mannikin craftsmen to produce miniature furniture under his direction."

Kern shook his head sadly. "Don't laugh," he said. Then he laughed himself. "I'm in a weird business, that's for sure. Sometimes after working in a world that's one-twelfth scale you step out into the street and the size of things startles you, the towering buildings, the giant pedestrians. Come home to an empty apartment and go from room to room and you sometimes feel you're being watched. (And, believe me, I've been feeling a lot of that recently.) You swing around quickly expecting to find an immense eye at the window. But it's only the moon. All the switching back and forth from Lilliput to Brobdingnag can unhinge the mind.

"More recently, Chapman's ravings turned electronic. One day he wrote to ask to borrow this very Belter table. Using some special optical scanning device he claimed he would create what he called an electronic template of the Belter which, by a holographic process, would allow him to reproduce the table in miniature at half the cost."

Kern shrugged at the very idea. "Chapman wasn't the kind of man you'd want as an enemy," he explained. "So I loaned him the table, which, in due course, he returned. A few weeks later Chapman's miniature furniture catalog arrived, showing my Belter table and many other fine pieces offered at half his usual price. Chapman did specify that payment must accompany each order, which was not unusual for a craftsman of his caliber. I imagined the orders pouring in from rich collectors and museums.

"Even these new prices were too much for me. Still, I thought, perhaps a less detailed piece like Sweeney Todd's barber chair, ordered in quantity, might reduce the price to within my reach. I decided to put the proposition to Chapman on my next visit to Hoboken, where he lived.

"His car was out front. When I rang the bell and no one came, I went out back to his workshop and peered in the window. Standing in the middle of the workshop floor was what I took to be a steel garbage can surfaced with small bumps like the inside had been worked over with a peen-ball hammer and, leaning against it, a silver plaque of the god Mercury. Suddenly I realized I was looking at large reproductions of a thimble and a Mercury dime, the same items Chapman used in his catalog to establish scale.

"Then a car door slammed. There was Chapman. He'd just put two suitcases on the front passenger seat of his car. As he started around to the driver's side he looked over and saw me standing there by the window and read the look on my face. Without a word he jumped in the car and roared away.

"An hour later he was arrested trying to get on a plane to Tahiti carrying close to a million dollars in cash. Apparently the government had

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been keeping him under surveillance on suspicion of mail fraud. But Chapman has always blamed me for his arrest and has sworn to kill me."

"Let me get this straight," said Polly. "This Chapman guy borrowed antiques like your Belter table and photographed them with garbage-can-sized thimbles and immense dimes to make them look small?"

Kern nodded. "The whole thing was a swindle. He'd planned to make this one big killing and skip the country. Anyway, since it was his first offense he got off with a suspended sentence on condition he give back the money. But the legal fees and the damage to his professional reputation bankrupted him.

"Already something of a crackpot, Chapman now became completely paranoid, claiming little people and giants were out to kill him. One day he shot an unlucky midget who happened to be walking behind him in the street. Chapman was put into an institution for the criminally insane from which he escaped several years ago. Then . . ."

Rubbing his high forehead in wonderment, Wallis interrupted to ask, "Mr. Kern, I don't understand. Why come to us? You've enough here to go right to the police."

Kern sighed. "I'm afraid Chapman did a job on me there. You see, last month he sent me a letter that read, 'Kern, you bastard, get ready. I mean to kill you. First, I'll show you a real scene of the crime. After that you'll have a week to live. Yours truly, Frederick Chapman.'

"Oh, the police took a letter from an escaped homicidal maniac very seriously. Until they made three discoveries. One, the letter had been typed on the portable typewriter I keep in my study. Two, the stationery matched my own. And three . . ." Kern paused to give them a baffled look. "Three, Chapman's signature was in my handwriting. I'd thought it looked oddly familiar.

"The police decided it was all a publicity stunt for my new fictional line of Murders in Miniature. They would've charged me if my lawyer hadn't smoothed things over. But I'm hardly in a position to go back to the police. Besides, I'm sure my apartment is secure." He tapped the miniature room. "If Chapman murders me it won't be like that."

Taking off the deerstalker with his thumb and forefinger on the visor, Kern scratched his head with the other fingers. "We wrote about the Belter table, so Chapman knew my stationery. And I recently sent the typewriter out for repair. Maybe he got his hands on it. But how could Chapman's signature be in my handwriting?"

The question floated there in the long silence. Polly's mind raced, for something told her she knew the answer.

Then Wallis asked, "Did you have any communication with Chapman in the asylum?"

Kern started to shake his head, then brightened. "His first month there he wrote to regret the intemperate things he'd said and asking me to think well of him. It was Christmas so I wrote the poor devil a

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few lines on a card, Scottie dogs in the snow, I recall it. . . ." Kern stopped. "Ah," he said.

Wallis nodded. "I'll bet Chapman treasured the envelope more than the card. And the warders would find it quite the usual thing, a madman copying his name out over and over again." Here Wallis cocked an eyebrow at Polly and mouthed the name Cornelia Otis Skinner.

Polly blushed and glared back. So that was how he'd figured it out. A mere week ago she'd read to him from her library book that when Cornelia Otis Skinner was away at school and received a letter from Otis Skinner, her famous stage-actor father, she would cut off the "Cornelia" on the envelope and sell the "Otis Skinner" part to her schoolmates as her father's autograph.

"You also said the letter opener went missing," said Wallis.

"And the cat," added Polly.

"And the cat," repeated her husband. "So the easiest explanation for the writing paper and the typewriter is that Chapman has access to your apartment."

"Impossible," insisted Kern. "Or at least I can't see how. As for the letter opener, until yesterday I assumed I'd accidentally knocked it off the table into the wastebasket and it'd been thrown out with the trash. And I figured the poor cat had darted past me out the door one morning when I left for work."

Kern thought for a moment before continuing. "Let me describe my situation. I live in an old Brooklyn Heights brownstone which my family purchased as a rental property some years ago. Do you know the type, two apartments per floor, each running the length of the building from front to back, five or six floors a building?"

"Thirty-eight years ago, in graduate school, I shared a fourth-floor walk-up just like that," said Wallis.

"Good," said Kern. "Well, I kept the upper floor for my own use, meaning to turn one apartment into my office and workshop and the other my living quarters. But I'm a light sleeper and the street traffic is noisy even at night. So I decided to put my place of business in the front and the living quarters in the back. My study, which you see here, and my bedroom are side by side at the rear of the building where the kitchens of the two apartments had been located."

He turned back to the miniature room. "I had the study done in the Rococo-Revival style popular just before the Civil War. The wallpaper is a Birge architectural pattern called 'Victorian.' The fireplace in the wall is open on both sides, cheering both the study and my bedroom. A clever touch, I thought."

"I admire the brocade dressing gown," said Polly.

"Thank you. Ironically enough, it's from Tom Thumb's Secret, a mail-order house specializing in doll apparel. I liked it so much I had my tailor copy it full-size."

"Is that a portable television next to the overturned brandy glass?" asked Polly.

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"I think that's this," said Kern, tapping the miniature room with his pen.

"It does get a bit confusing," said Polly.

"And what about security?" asked Wallis.

"I was just getting to that," said Kern, adding, "When a madman has a grudge against you, you can't be too careful." He began counting things off on his fingers. "The apartment's exterior door is steel with an anti-jimmy plate and two locks, a vertical deadbolt lock with a pick-resistant cylinder and a mortise lock. The windows are gated with iron bars. And there's a perimeter alarm, a circuit routed through foil tape on the window glass and a magnetic catch on the door. Break the circuit and an alarm sounds at my security company's office."

"Ah, life in the big city," remembered Wallis.

"They recommended a space alarm, too," said Kern, "a sonic device to detect an intruder. But my cat was a curious little creature. She would have set it off, poking her nose in everywhere." When he paused Polly could see he missed the cat. "And, oh," he said, returning to the matter at hand, "after the business with the police over Chapman's letter I had a security expert come in and tap around for secret entrances."

"Cat ladders," said Polly quickly.

Kern blinked and turned red, as if he'd been accused of talking hogwash or horsefeathers.

"Your cat's missing and you've got a fireplace," explained Polly. "It made me think of cat ladders. In New England, way back when, they'd lean a board with strips nailed across its width in the flue during the months when the fireplace wasn't in use. If a cat got shut up inside a room it could escape up the chimney to the fireplace in the room above."

"But I don't have a chimney," explained Kern. "My fireplace is gas. It doesn't need venting."

"No chimney, no cat ladders," said Wallis.

"And no cat," Polly had the small pleasure of reminding him. But it didn't make up for cat ladders being a dead end.

"Who else has a key to your apartment?" asked Wallis.

"My cleaning lady, Mrs. Brill, who's been with me for years. When her invalid husband was alive I helped with his medical expenses and her daughter's college tuition. I have complete trust in Mrs. Brill's loyalty. She comes Thursdays, spends the day cleaning, leaves my dinner in the refrigerator for me to heat up. On her way out she takes down the week's garbage and leaves it with the super for the Friday pickup."

Wallis had thrown his head back and was staring into the far corner. The old house was a vast archipelago of ceiling stains, certain of which Wallis stared at when in concentrated thought. Polly had decided the far corner one was shaped something like the island of Cyprus.

"While I think of it," said Kern to Polly to fill the silence, "Chapman would never have included a human figure in one of his own rooms as he's done here. No, Chapman's signature was to leave something to indicate a recent human presence: top hat and gloves on the table by

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the door, a shawl thrown across a chair, a tiny newspaper with the headline 'Fort Sumter Fired Upon' and the door to the spring garden flung wide as if someone had just rushed off to join his regiment."

"A freshly stabbed corpse sure indicates the murderer's recent presence," suggested Polly.

Here Wallis rejoined the conversation. "Mr. Kern, do you know your tenants?"

"Only those I meet on the elevator. I leave the leasing and rent collection to a firm of property managers."

"Good," said Wallis. "Now, you said your Mrs. Brill took the garbage down for the weekly pickup. In my day a buzzer rang in the kitchen and the super sent up the dumbwaiter from the basement. Putting in the garbage was always my job. One of my roommates was a philosopher and much above such things. The other slept all day, prowled the night, and claimed to be a poet."

Polly was delighted. "You never told me about that. It's just like *La Bohéme* only with garbage."

Her husband asked, "Mr. Kern, when you remodeled and put your bedroom and study where the two kitchens had been, what happened to the dumbwaiter?"

"Oh, it's still in operation. I just had them lower the machinery to the next floor, closed off the shaft, and installed my fireplace over it."

Wallis spread his fingers and tapped their tips wisely together, a gesture Polly found particularly theatrical.

"Then I suggest Chapman has taken an apartment in your building," said her husband solemnly. "In fact, I think it's one of the two immediately under you. Any working day except Thursday he would then be able to come up the dumbwaiter shaft and cut a way into your apartment."

"You mean stick a ladder up the shaft?" asked Kern.

"Your missing cat suggests he sloped up a plank with some kind of a platform angled onto it. Chapman's a craftsman, after all, and he'd want a place to stand on when he's working around the wheels and counterweights of the dumbwaiter machinery. On one of his visits he must have left the trapdoor open and . . ."

"And Mr. Kern's cat decided to investigate and ended up down in Chapman's apartment," said Polly, happy that her "cat ladder" suggestion had contributed something, however indirectly.

Wallis nodded. "It wouldn't have been difficult for Chapman to turn the new flooring under the fireplace into a trap door. By replacing a length of the copper gas pipe with a rubber hose he could raise up the hearth, fake logs and all, and enter your apartment at will. That's how he did all his mischief. And it was no accident his letter came in the winter. After the stationery and typewriter business he knew you'd bring in a security expert to look for secret entrances. But the man wouldn't waste much time tapping around a burning fireplace.

"So there you are, feeling you're secure. Then one day before you

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come home from work Chapman will enter your apartment by the fireplace. He'll hide and wait until you're in the study with your nightcap. Then he'll strike you down from behind. When he's arranged everything as it is here in the miniature room, he'll leave by the front door."

"But what am I supposed to do?" demanded Kern. "Move to a hotel? Nail down the fireplace?"

Wallis shook his head. "Chapman would only come at you another way another time. No, I'd better call my old poet-roommate friend who recently retired from the New York police force." He reached for the telephone behind the Hubbard volumes, adding, "Maybe Dr. Muir can tell you why so many police captains are spoiled poets."

"While you're at it," suggested Polly, "ask him why so many poetry professors are spoiled detectives."

Wallis ignored the remark. "When I've filled my friend in he'll know what to do, Mr. Kern. Our homicidal Chapman will be in police custody before you get home. I can see it all now. Detectives pounding up the stairs, the splintering of the door, and there stands Chapman, transfixed with astonishment."

"With your cat purring around his ankles," added Polly.

As the telephone connection was being made Wallis turned back to Kern. "Or would you like the police to wait so you can be in on the kill? How about this? Chapman tries to escape up the dumbwaiter shaft. He raises the fireplace and there you stand with two sturdy policemen at your side."

Kern spoke decisively. "Please have the police move as quickly as they can." Then he sagged visibly as though free of a great weight. After a moment he looked at Polly. "Still," he said in a sad voice, "it's hard not to pity Chapman."

"I understand," she said.

"Yes," agreed Wallis, hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. "But I'd save all that until he's safely tucked away."

After dinner Polly asked her husband if he wanted to watch television. "I've had my share of staring into little boxes for today," he told her. "Besides, I've still got the books to do."

That was fine with Polly, who was already working out her next story in her head. It would introduce a pair of brand new detectives, the ten-year-old Cody twins, Dorothy and Dashiell, who would pedal their blue tandem bike around their hometown searching for crimes to solve. She thought they would be perfect for *The Mysterious Hornbook* magazine. She would call their first story "The Haunted Tree House" and it would begin:

Dashiell Cody pumped the tandem up Yeggman Hill, shoulders hunched high, head down. As always, just as he reached the top the male twin swung around and said, "Put your back into it, Dot." And as

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always, his sister pretended to be pumping and replied, "Watch where you're going, Dash."

Indeed, coming over the rise, they nearly collided with their startled neighbor, Miss Borden, pedaling home from the hardware store where she'd taken her axe to be sharpened.

The Cody twins coasted down the gentle grade into Hooligan Falls, a town whose dark tree-lined streets, sharp picket fences, and brooding clapboard houses held more mysteries than even a child's mind could encompass. They passed the donut shop Scotty Macbeth inherited after Mr. Duncan's unexpected death. They passed the bank and waved at Constable Stumbleton crossing the town square. Turning his head to wave back, he marched right into the flagpole. They passed Julio's pizzeria with the banner in the window promoting the new giant pie, the Brute. "Nobody's Ever Et Two Brutes!" it declared. Julio's pizzas were better than his grammar.

In the vacant lot at the corner of Burke and Hare the James boys were waiting beneath the plywood shed which stood some thirty feet off the ground in the sycamore tree. Among the children of Hooligan Falls the tree house was a marvel like Valhalla, and the James boys' two older brothers, who built it for them, had the status of giants in their eyes.

"We heard the ghost up there again last night after supper, Dot," said Jesse, who had been chosen spokesman because he had the most freckles. "He was talking to somebody." Jesse addressed the female twin who, since Dash did all the tandem pedaling, was widely regarded as the brains of the detective team.

"Then let's see what we've got," said Dot, leading the way up the steps to the tree house.

"I still say cornstarch would have been just as good as sprinkling flour," said Dash.

Dot gave him a pitying look. "And scare off whatever it is with the crunch?" she asked, pushing open the tree-house door.

"Geez!" everybody said. A single set of large footprints in the flour led from the door over to the tree house's three windows and back to the door. "Like I said yesterday," said Dot, "ghosts don't leave footprints."

"A Sasquatch, then," said Dash. "A baby Bigfoot."

"Why can't it just be a grownup?" demanded Dot.

Dash laughed. "A grownup in a tree house?" he said. "Grownups only go where the money is."

Stroking her chin the way her father did when thinking, Dot had to admit her twin brother was right. ●

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The Hermit Genius of Marshville

by Tom Tolnay

WARNING: This exclusive report is fully protected by copyright and appears in this magazine for the first time anywhere.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The documents, tape recordings, articles, and investigative accounts herein represent, to our knowledge, the first published effort to draw into an intelligible whole the emerging story of Griswold Masterson, popularly known as "The Hermit Genius of Marshville." While admittedly incomplete, these materials provide a framework through which our readers may gain an impression of the ideas and life of the secretive, eccentric, self-made philosopher/scientist.

A former editor of *Backstage* magazine and currently the owner of a small press that publishes books on fly-fishing, poetry, art, and literature, Tom Tolnay is also a short story writer with credits in many national magazines. Mr. Tolnay has previously placed four stories with *EQMM*. His fascination with all aspects of the publishing process is evident in his new story for us, in which even *EQMM* assumes a role. . .

EQMM became aware of the Hermit Genius the way many scientific discoveries are made—by chance. Last summer an editorial assistant, on vacation in Maine, went fishing in a ten-foot powerboat near the mouth of the Peace River. The young man got caught in a squall, and it looked as though he was going to be swamped, when a returning lobster boat spotted him and pulled his craft to safety. Afterwards, the assistant insisted the lobsterman join him for something to eat and drink. In a local tavern the two men had their tongues loosened by several mugs of ale, and that's when the strange doings at Marshville first came up.

When the story of the Hermit Genius got back to us, naturally we were highly sceptical. But having let more than one major story get

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away from us over the years, we reluctantly decided to send a reporter† up to Maine to check it out. That decision proved to be well worth the investment, for she uncovered a story of international—we might even say, universal—implications.

At a very early age—three or four—legend has it that Griswold Masterson got hold of several science fiction magazines and within a period of months had taught himself to read. By five or six, it is said, he had gone through much of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells at a local lending library outside Marshville. Masterson apparently was greatly moved by the realization that each of us is stuck in our own time—that our finiteness precludes our partaking of the scientific advantages of succeeding ages. And at some point he must have made a childhood pledge to himself that one day he would overcome such limitations in his own life.

Before attaining maturity, Masterson began conducting experiments in the basement of the house in which he was born. He worked fifteen to twenty hours a day in what turned out to be a lifelong attempt to find a means by which he could experience firsthand the technological promises of ages to come. Late in his career, he apparently made a discovery that enabled him to realize his childhood dream.

In the years to come, as the world gradually pieces together more of Masterson's remarkable adventure, all human beings may find their lives altered for the better. In the meantime, we must content ourselves with having at least begun to study and, hopefully, learn from this one solitary life.

Wanda Pierce
Editor

EQMM's reporter began her investigation by visiting the local elementary school, on the road between Machias and Marshville, in the township of Harrington, Maine. Requesting access to school records, she was turned down summarily by school officials. But the reporter followed the school secretary home, explained her mission, and, finally, managed to elicit her aid. Griswold Masterson's grades turned out to be rather poor, and the only noteworthy entry in school records was that he had been expelled on May 17, 1946, at the age of eleven. Mrs. Martha Tuttle, the principal, wrote the following comments in her report of this incident:

"The student is totally uncooperative. He never raises his hand, never erases the blackboard, never recites in class, never does his homework. . . . His teacher, Maryanne Wilson, reports that all he does is read books on astronomy and destroy school property—scribbling crazy formulas on desk tops. . . . Elsie and Josiah Masterson were called up to school, and they indicated he was the same way at home. . . . 'Doesn't seem to hear a thing we say,' according to Mrs. Masterson. . . .

† At their request, the identities of the assistant and the reporter are being withheld.

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'That boy's head is in the clouds,' said Mr. Masterson."

Our reporter visited Washington County High School outside Marshville. There she found one instructor—physics teacher Groden Catlege—who was willing to discuss Griswold. Nearly eighty years old and weighing about the same, Catlege was feisty, fearless, but forgetful:

"Wasn't he the kid who tried to burn down the post office 'cause he didn't receive a package of books? Or was he the one who quit school at sixteen to study astrophysics on his own? One of those rascals in my class trapped stray cats for experiments. Could that have been Masterson?" (*Editor's Note: Masterson may have been all three.*) "Well, sir, whichever of those things he did, he was no weirdo the way people tried to make out. Hell, it was the town that drove him to shut himself away. . . . Yes, sir, he had a grasp of the physical and theoretical sciences that defied normal capacities for knowledge. Uncanny it was, the way he could join opposing elements in his mind. And his curiosity was insatiable—climbed a tree in a storm to study lightning and sure enough got struck to the ground! . . . Yes, sir, I laughed it off at the time, but now, who knows, maybe the feller was right when he said to me, one day after school: 'Einstein is interesting, but he misses the point.'"

If young "Grist," as the town called him, was advanced mentally beyond most of us, physically he was a poor specimen. The only photograph of him known to exist, snapped by a local, now-deceased shutterbug, shows Masterson passing the general store, attempting to cover his face with his hands. He was probably in his early twenties and, obviously, had not yet entirely shut himself away. The photo, judging from its faded sepia, was taken with an old box camera—and under far from cooperative conditions. But it did provide a glimpse of his stubby teeth and drastically receding hair, along with the bony slabs that served for shoulders. Accounts of Masterson's height differ greatly—some say over six feet, others say under five feet. (Judging from the size of his shoe, the latter seems more likely.) Whatever the truth, that disagreement dramatizes the misunderstanding and mythmaking that surrounded him all his life. *EQMM*'s attempt to obtain that photograph to publish with these materials was thwarted by Butch White, who oversees the community's grange hall. White "accidentally" dropped it into a lighted potbelly stove moments after our reporter—who had discovered it tacked under a wad of announcements on the hall's bulletin board—asked White who it was. The snapshot must've been put up as a joke so long ago that people had stopped seeing it. Our reporter protested, but White told her:

"You better clear outta here if you know what's good for that pretty neck of yours."

Why would the people of Marshville want to suppress information about a man who had no contact with (or interest in) them? From the cold shoulders and slammed doors and outright threats aimed at her, our reporter suspected that people in this solemn, oak-locked town were afraid of drawing attention to themselves—of disrupting their simple

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way of life. But as she found out more about Masterson, she thought it more likely the townspeople were behaving peculiarly out of an irrational terror they felt toward the secret experiments that had been conducted in the sagging house on Cobalt Hill (a name that may come from its steely hue at dusk). They seemed to think that if the reporter stirred up the strange dust of Masterson's work, it might contaminate them all.

One person who seemed anxious to speak out cast a more specific focus on the nature of the town's fear. The pastor of the First Presbyterian (and only) Church, Rev. Leopold Ossip, suggested that being mentally ahead and physically less appealing than the "local folks" made it impossible for Grist to make friends or even casual connections. Ossip decided this had led Masterson to seek out and establish an unholy alliance with "dark supernatural forces." Here is his statement, slightly edited, as taped by our reporter:

"Facts all point in that direction. Grist came into town less and less, barricading himself in the broken-down house left behind by his folks—Josiah and Elsie died more or less simultaneously some years back, you know. (By the way, no one's been able to figure out how it happened. And I would not entirely discount the talk that Grist's ma and pa perished in one of his mad experiments.) Living off his folks' savings, and on vegetables he grew in vats in the house, under heat lamps, using kerosene for heat and power (he'd welded himself a huge tank and had it filled once a year, you know), Grist was more or less self-sufficient. Near as anyone in the congregation can figure, he never did anything but read, perform experiments in that fiendish cellar, and tend his indoor garden. (They say he grew tomatoes the size of cantaloupes!) God knows he didn't come to church! Queer thing is, you know, people passing near his place some nights could hear him reciting the Bible loud and clear, like he was committing it to memory. That gave me hope there was an ounce of religion left in him, so one afternoon I walked up Cobalt Hill, stepped onto the Masterson porch bold as you please, and knocked—hard. But he wouldn't open the door. When it comes to saving souls I can be pretty stubborn, though, so I stood there and called out in the name of the Lord: 'Now Grist,' I said, 'you know darn well that business you're engaged in is contrary to a moral life, contrary to the laws of God.' And you know what he said to me? With his door still locked, mind you, he said in that scratchy hiss of his: 'The secret of all that was, all that is, and all that will be lies in my experiments.' I never tried to save him again, you know, for he'd convinced me I'd been right all along: He was in cahoots with the devil!"

When Rev. Ossip had said all he was going to say, our reporter asked him: "What exactly was the nature of Griswold Masterson's experiments?" The God-fearing man, "a well-dried pastorly type," stared at the reporter as if she'd spoken a dead language, then turned on his heel and moved down the aisle, kneeling at the altar to pray.

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Griswold Masterson was not entirely successful in escaping human involvement. By sheer perversity of personality, and an overpowering loneliness, Beryl Ward of Columbia Falls managed to gain access to his house, if not his heart. Having been abandoned by her husband after one year of marriage, and having spent the subsequent decade growing grim and frustrated—having lost both her parents, too—Miss Ward, at well past forty, decided that a life alone was no life at all. At the very least she needed someone to look after. And since there were no other prospects within reach, she set her cap on Griswold Masterson—sight unseen, though with plenty of tales about him in her head: His isolation constituted a local legend. If nothing else, she could be sure he wouldn't pack up and run off on her.

A former neighbor of Miss Ward's, whom the editors tracked down in Boston, apparently felt far enough removed from the scene to speak to us over the phone (though not far enough to authorize us to use her name) on the unusual courtship of Griswold and Beryl:

"I mean that Beryl Ward was always sniffing round Mr. Masterson's house. And even though he fired off a shotgun on the roof one night to scare her off, that hussy just kept going back. All the way down on Main Street we could hear her calling to him—she was going to wait forever, she'd shout loud as a loon, so he might as well open up. But he didn't; so what does she do?—that hussy starts sleeping out on an old sofa on the porch. I mean, the town got really upset with her, but what could we do? Then one morning the door of the house opened, just like that, and Beryl Ward moseyed inside. Nothing but a rusty-headed hussy! After that there sure was plenty of talk about what they were doing up there on Cobalt Hill, if you know what I mean. Personally I doubt it very much—he was all mind and no body. Besides, what would any man see in Beryl Ward?"

EQMM's theory is that Mr. Masterson gave in to Miss Ward for two reasons: (1) It gave him more time and energy for his work, rather than expending physical and mental resources worrying about what she was doing out on the porch; (2) There were probably many items he needed on a continual basis for his experiments, goods she could procure from the local general store while he worked: candles, jars, nails, copper tubing, alcohol, matches, wire, batteries, welding rods, and who knows what else? How Beryl Ward reacted upon setting eyes on him for the first time is not known, and what she found inside the huge, unpainted, crumbling place is open to speculation. But the large shopping list she turned over to the store clerk that first month—including ammonia, detergent, scouring pads, and a mop—confirmed what most believed to be the case: Griswold Masterson, already being referred to as one of the great unheralded minds of this century, apparently lived like a farm animal. Probably the biggest housekeeping problem Beryl Ward had were the science fiction magazines, the technical books, and the philo-

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ophical tracts he'd collected over the decades. According to our Boston source:

"He had so many books you could see them from the footpath—stacked up every which way; I mean, they just blocked out the living room windows; I mean, you could smell the moldiness all the way down to Jill's beauty shop! . . . Thousands of rats and mice must've been nesting in that house. Ugh!"

It did not occur to Miss Ward's former neighbor that the Hermit Genius may have been consciously attempting to attract those rodents, for they might have served an important function in his work. In any case, she indicated further that sometimes there were empty packing cartons scattered on the porch. The local postmaster/general store proprietor confirmed that a few times each year Griswold Masterson received shipments from laboratory supply companies around the country. But when our reporter asked the gray-faced postmaster what he could tell us about the weight and size of those boxes, and about what might have been inside them, his voice hardened:

"Didn't pay attention, and I wouldn't want to know. And *stop* coming around here botherin' me! I got work to do."

The fire which destroyed the two-story, stick-built house on Cobalt Hill may indeed have gotten started through spontaneous combustion, as Marshville residents contended—those dried-out magazines springing into flames. Or maybe a bolt of lightning set it off. Or a kerosene lamp left lit by mistake may have been knocked over by the wind. An act of nature may well have been the cause. But with the attitude the town maintained toward Masterson and his work, one had to wonder. Certainly our reporter did. However, she was unable to come up with any evidence of arson, conspiratorial or otherwise. Of course, Rev. Ossip saw it as neither an act of Nature nor Man:

"God was righting a grievous wrong."

Sifting through the ashy remains in the Masterson basement, *EQMM*'s reporter made an important find: a few fragments of yellow, lined manuscript pages, written in what is undoubtedly the hand of Griswold Masterson. Tragically, most of Masterson's papers must have been destroyed by flames, and even sections of the fragments salvaged—preserved by mere chance under a slab of fallen boilerplate—were damaged by heat and water. In attempting to piece together a skeleton of Masterson's thoughts, the editors have bracketed words that were obliterated or not entirely readable, corrected misspellings and obvious grammatical oversights, and are publishing the fragments in the order that seems to offer the greatest continuity. But the total sense of these elements will probably never be known:

> . . . in the Practical Future—a psychological response to immediate human needs, the second is the Theoretical Future—a cry for more time to experience Man's potential. In pursuing the Practical Future

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we are expressing a [desire to preview particular] events so that we might alter their outcome in some way that is meaningful to our existence. In pondering the Theoretical [Future], we are attempting to break out of the [limitations of our flesh]—to participate in a time beyond our physical life span. . . .

After countless attempts to discard faulty reasoning, it became clear that bridging the Practical and Theoretical would have to be accomplished not entirely physically, not entirely spiritually, but through a journey involving mind and body. . . .

. . . still another discipline, that of philosophy. Specifically the question of an immortal presence in the universe. If the world as we know it was indeed shaped through a process of evolution, certainly that development had to be set into motion: It needed a Prime Mover. But how events are shaped in the future will depend on Man. . . .

There is no more. While we suspect hundreds of these handwritten sheets were destroyed (bear in mind the technical aspects of his experiments have barely been alluded to in these fragments), who can say for sure?

In searching the ruins of the house our reporter came across the remains of jars and test tubes—apparently smashed by the volunteer firemen. She also recovered a charred corner of a schematic drawing that seems to correspond to the stainless-steel cylinder the sheriff and his deputy reputedly found in Masterson's basement the morning before the fire. That was the day Beryl Ward reported the Hermit Genius missing. The reporter didn't get to see the cylinder itself, and there was much too little of the schematic to infer anything meaningful. (This was confirmed by the International Institute of Scientific Phenomena in New York, to whom we later turned it over.) So the editors of this magazine contacted the Washington County sheriff's office by telephone, requesting permission to inspect the cylinder in person. Deputy Durham Stone told us:

"Save yourself the trip. Thing's missing. Me and the sheriff, we went back to the office to get the pickup truck, so's we could haul it to the compound, but when we got back up to the house it was gone. Plain disappeared! . . . Say, how come you city folks want to come all the way out to these parts to see that thing anyway? It's just an old liquid propane gas tank, if you ask me."

The deputy's comments made us all the more curious—not to mention suspicious—so our managing editor drove up anyway. And while he could not locate the cylinder at the compound, or at the ruins, or even in the nearby woods, the trip was amply rewarded. Through certain inducements *EQMM* managed to borrow (and re-record) the tape of the official statement made to Sheriff Joe Bartheme by Beryl Ward the day she reported Masterson missing. In a quavering voice which frequently broke down (as indicated by ellipses), here's what she said:

"When Grist didn't come upstairs for the dinner I left by the door—

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did that every day for him—I called but he didn't answer. That got me worried. . . . He kept the basement door locked, so I went round to the side of the house to look in a window—but they were painted black. I'd never noticed that before. I knocked and knocked on the glass; still there was no answer. That really got me upset; I thought he'd had a heart attack or something so I got an axe out of the shed and started hitting the lock on the storm-shelter door. Finally the lock fell apart and I went in. . . . Didn't see Griswold anywhere. All I found were a bunch of tubes and wires and gadgets, plus some weird charts on the wall. . . . What really amazed me was the big Bible on the stand: It was opened to Genesis." (*Editor's note: no trace of a Bible was ever found.*) "In the back room of the basement I found this . . . kind of a cylinder, I guess . . . set up on a log-cutting horse. And it was glowing. So help me! . . . Top and bottom were rounded off; looked like a huge vitamin pill, or a miniature rocket ship. . . . I did what I knew would've made Griswold very angry, but I couldn't help myself. Guess I wanted to know once and for all what he was up to—why he stayed up night after night—why his work was more important to him than . . . than anything else in the world. I started unscrewing the cap. . . . All of a sudden there was a tremendous *whoosh* and I heard this weird, high-pitched squeal: Scared the daylights out of me, but I looked inside and saw . . . I couldn't believe it—I found a baby. . . . Just a few months old—a naked baby! It looked up at me as if I were its mother. I was confused, I was frightened. . . . First I wanted to run away, but instincts much deeper took hold of me, I guess. I reached in and pulled the baby out. A fine child, with purplish eyes and silky skin. It didn't even cry. Just looked at me—poor thing!—and stopped breathing. . . . I wondered where Griswold had gotten the baby, what he was doing with it—all sorts of weird things I wondered until I spotted, off in a black corner . . . I saw Griswold's gray trousers and lab smock, his underwear and socks all neatly folded on a bench. . . ."

At this point Miss Ward became silent, and when Sheriff Bartheme asked (more than once) what she did next, she broke down and cried hysterically. Nothing else on the tape was coherent. Later that afternoon Beryl Ward had to be removed from the house in a state police straightjacket, kicking and screaming. That night, the house went up in flames.

In the aftermath of these events—the disappearance of Griswold Masterson, the discovery of the cylinder, the loss of Miss Ward's grip on reality, the destruction of the house—and as news spread out into the world, scientists and sociologists and theologians hastily began postulating theories. A few of these ideas were incorporated in the summary presented at a recent meeting of the American Board of Science in Washington, D.C.:

"Due to the absence of conclusive data, and the seclusion and secrecy in which Griswold Masterson chose to work throughout his life, and

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because so much of his research was destroyed, our inquiry, thougl arduous, has been, in many ways, unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, it i our shared opinion that Mr. Masterson achieved the ability to projec himself into the physical form and mental development of his owi infancy, and that he used this means to renew his future. That is t say, he opened the door to what he called the "Theoretical Future" no by achieving longevity, but by reducing his age as the framework of lif around him progressed at its usual rate. This means that Masterson who was sixty-three years old at the time of this experiment, b regressing, made available to himself another seventy-two years (base on current life expectancy for a male in this country). . . . The ide seems to have been to enable himself to observe the future at least sev enty years hence, with his records of his first sixty-three years meant t serve as the link between his lifetimes. Of course, this would leave oper the possibility of his regressing to infancy again and again—a capabil ity he may not have originally anticipated. . . . Tragically, however, we will probably never know precisely how he accomplished this, for the machine Beryl Ward found has disappeared, and the baby Griswold i dead."

While the theory of the American Board of Science has the weight o evidence behind it, the editors of this magazine must point out that there is an important consideration that has not yet been addressed the human element. Beryl Ward had apparently fallen desperately in love with Griswold Masterson. And faced with the prospect of having t watch the man she loved slowly bloom into a youngster—and then into a young man—while she grew shriveled and weak (unaware of the universal implications of his experiments), she may have placed a pillow over the child's mouth until it wailed and clawed no longer. (Miss Ward is locked behind bars in an institution for the criminally insane.) Thus a basic human emotion may have been responsible for our being separated forever from the full implications of Masterson's experiments. This, as we see it, is the ultimate irony, the ultimate tragedy of the life and times of Griswold Masterson.

The sheriff's office is much too close to the real world to bend to the hypotheses of the intellectual community, so they have simply listed Griswold Masterson as a missing person. The child in the cylinder? From the pulpit Rev. Leopold Ossip has rendered the opinion, on more than one occasion, that the infant was the illegitimate offspring of Mr. Masterson and Miss Ward, and that in her madness she murdered her own son. The story she told the sheriff, Ossip proclaimed, was the invention of an unholy "and therefore diseased" mind. While much of Marshville seems to have accepted the reverend's view, the rest of the world does not agree—judging from the many interpretations which have surfaced on the significance of the child. The most remarkable aspect of the entire affair, however, may be the steel cylinder. While its

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whereabouts has never been firmly established, a newspaper article (no date was indicated) clipped from the *Battleboro Gazette*, published in Saskatchewan, Canada, and sent to our offices by an anonymous reader, could well have some bearing on that mystery:

CAVE PEOPLE IN STRANGE VIGIL

People have begun to gather on a hillside outside Battleboro, Saskatchewan, and each morning there seem to be more of them, speaking in a growing variety of tongues.

All day these people do little more than sit and stare at an object partially imbedded in the earth, which blocks off the mouth of a natural cave—one of a series in the area. The stainless-steel capsule, apparently catching the gleam of the sun, seems to glow as if from its own internal light.

Toward evening, the cave people can be heard chanting. Once the sun is down, they build campfires, and the chanting stops. Lately they have been entering the catacombs of surrounding caves to shelter themselves for the night and, it is said, to pray.

Battleboro police told the *Gazette* that the cave people are orderly and are breaking no laws. "That hill is part of a huge national forest preserve, open to all Canadians," said Chief Judd Nooson. "There's nothing much we can do about them, legally."

A professor of philosophy at the University of Saskatchewan, Stanley Nihlin, offered a possible explanation: "In these times of rapid change, when religious belief is at such a low level, people try on cults like new shoes. And discard them just as quickly."

A curious postscript to that newspaper item and, indeed, to this entire investigation, is that the editorial assistant who first heard about the Hermit Genius of Marshville, and the reporter who covered the story for *EQMM,* have resigned. Reportedly she left her husband and children and he left his fiancée and friends behind to join the cave people. But this has not been confirmed. ●

PUZZLE IN POESY

Continued from page 17

Hammett pets the Beagle. Poe sips the Beaujolais.

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Art by Laurie Harden

ONE HUNDRED CANDLES

by Raymond Steiber

Her high heels were clicking along the sidewalk of a narrow street near the Plaza Municipal when she first saw them. They were in the front seat of a shiny black Jeep Cherokee and they both wore jet black sunglasses. The one on the right turned his head and stared at her. It was not the usual male stare, the kind that quickly slipped below the neck and appraised the body. It locked on her face and as the Jeep passed followed her, not to catch a glimpse of the dress twitching across her rear end, but to make sure—to mark her.

She turned the next corner as rapidly as she could, and only her own sunglasses disguised the fact that she was nearly in tears. Tears of fear, anger, and dismay.

The dogs have come, she thought.

But then Patricio had said they would.

But why now—when her mind was on other things? The dry heat of the Sonoran afternoon. The feel of her body against the fabric of her dress. The look of herself as she was reflected in this or that store window—good-looking, yet a little hard. Why now, when she'd managed to put the very possibility of them—at least for this day—out of her head?

She turned into a bar—a working man's *cantina*—no place for a

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well-turned *chica* to find herself alone. It was dark after the glare of the street, and fortunately empty. She knew the bartender—that was why she'd sought refuge there. He was a friend of Patricio's—assuming Patricio still had any friends in this place—anyone who could *afford* to be his friend.

She put her hands on the bar, and her gold bracelets jangled against the formica.

She said: "Do you want me to tell you what a *madrina* looks like?" Her voice was higher pitched than usual and sharp with sarcasm.

On the book jacket of one of Raymond Steiber's mystery novels, renowned mystery editor Joan Kahn wrote, "We're not going to tell you anything about the author—because he's not telling." That was many years ago, but the retiring Mr. Steiber, who currently lives in North Carolina, hasn't changed his view of self-promotion. We'll let his work speak for him. ¶

Justo, the bartender, gazed at her with eyes that seemed asleep.

"Tell me," he said. He didn't ask which sort of *madrina*.

"He has a black suit and a black tie and he wears sunglasses as dark as night. And he carries a fold-up cellular phone in his pocket and he drives an air-conditioned Jeep Cherokee with tinted glass all around. It must be like riding in an aquarium—hey? Or at the bottom of the sea."

Justo raised his shoulders. "It could be anyone."

"No. It was the *madrinas*. They looked at me and they knew who I was. *That's Barbara. See how she's tried to make herself look like a* norteamericana. *But she's one of us anyway and no amount of hair dye will hide it.* What will you say if they come here?"

Justo took a *limonada* from under the bar. He popped the cap and put it in front of her along with a glass. The Jeep Cherokee cruised by on the street outside. She could see it reflected in the spotted mirror behind the bar—dimly because of her sunglasses and the dirty exterior window—like a vaguely threatening image from a dream.

The *limonada* fizzed in its bottle. Justo looked at her and said nothing, but his expression was infinitely sad.

"Just what I thought," she said.

She turned on her heel and click-click-clicked her way down the bar and out the back.

In the street the glare of the sun seemed to leave her naked. They would know where she lived, and it was many hours till sunset. She took to the alleys. Once, passing the open back door of a coffee bar where the young gathered, she heard the blare of the latest *narco* ballad—how Juan Orozco had flown high on *yanqui* drug money and how in the end the white dress of the *muy linda* Maria had been spotted with his blood. She wanted to scream then—not with terror or anguish but with hot flowing anger.

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She reached the wasteland at the edge of the town and removed he high-heeled shoes and stockings and stuffed them in her shoulder bag Then she set out across the arid landscape.

There was a *tienda* along the dirt road that ran out to the fishing vi lage beside the Gulf. She reached it in half an hour and filled a burla bag with this and that from its shelves. Matches. Patricio had particu larly insisted on matches. Then she drank a cola in the shade of th eaves and set off for the hills.

She was supposed to have brought the old Ford Fiesta—the one wit one fender a different color from the rest and a cracked windshield. Th key for it was on a chain around her neck. She could feel the metal of i against the skin of her breasts—warm now, almost a part of her, wher in the morning it had been cool and alien.

There was a place where she was to have left the car, then gone o foot several miles across the hills. Now she'd have to walk all the way Maybe the *madrinas* would know about the Fiesta. Maybe they'd watc it and not realize she'd already gone.

Madrinas, she thought, and spat. Bridesmaids. Bridesmaids of death They were assassins of a special sort. Rogue members of the federa police who hired themselves out to the new breed of *narco* bandits a hit men. But that's Mexico—hey? The poor get ground into the dirt an the police sell themselves to the drug traffickers. And the Big Pocket in the capital want everyone to respect them! But no one respect them—not even their new tame friends in Washington.

But how were she and Patricio any different? Hadn't they also see their chance and grabbed for it? As if they didn't know how it alway ended for people like them. With pretty Maria wailing over the body o her slaughtered bridegroom.

She emptied her mind and continued walking. When her mouth grev dry, she took an orange out of the sack and cut a notch in it and sucke on it. The sun climbed down the sky and threw her shadow before he and reddened the hills. Then a rusty orange dusk settled and she foun the path she was hunting for. It took her into the hills, and at last there was the abandoned village. A dozen adobe houses, their roofs long gone their walls pocked by ancient gunfire—bullets from the time of Villa and Zapata and the *Revolución*.

He came out to meet her in the dusk. The white teeth showed in hi sun-darkened face and the blue eyes—eyes she loved because they were so different from the other eyes she knew—seemed to smile a her.

"Barbara," he said. Then again: "Barbara," but this time the way a Anglo would say it—as if he were practicing.

He took the burlap bag from her and they embraced.

"Your mouth tastes of oranges," he said.

"Never mind how my mouth tastes. The *madrinas* have come."

He continued to hold her. But he didn't look at her.

"Well, it was expected," he said after a moment.

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"Someone will talk. They'll come here."
"No one knows where I am."
"This is Sonora—everyone knows and they whisper it everywhere. ıd when the time comes they'll whisper it to *them.*"
He let go of her.
"Did you bring the Ford?"
"I couldn't. They saw me. They knew who I was. I didn't dare go near "
"It would have been a gamble anyway, that old car. Come, sit down. ıd if there's bread and cheese in this bag we'll make a modest meal."
"How can you take this so calmly?"
"I'm filled with fear. Doesn't it show? I don't want to be the subject of ıe of their ballads. I don't want them talking in the *cantinas* about ıw I fell on my knees when they came and begged for my life."
"You'd never beg."
"You don't think so? But yes, I think so. It's so painful, Barbara, to ve up this life. But it won't stop them. No, they pull the trigger all the ster if you beg. It encourages them."
They were seated now on an old stone bench outside one of the ruined ıuses. He had a jug of water there and poured some into a tin cup for ır.
She drank, tasting the tin and the cool of the water.
She said: "Is there no way you can square things with Jorge?"
"Ai—but we've talked about this before, Barbara. Jorge's feet are no ore solid than mine. In this business a man has a run of three, maybe re, good years, and Jorge's had seven. He has to show the Big Pockets at he's still a serious *hombre*, that he knows what to do about an ıderling who loses a shipment of the wonderful white powder the *yan-ıis* like to stick up their noses. Never mind that it was the police emselves that grabbed it and are now selling it on their own. And ver mind either that I was outgunned and barely escaped with my e. When big money's lost, somebody has to pay—that's the rule. And ıo's the peon around here?"
"We never should've got into this business," she said sharply.
"What other way was there for us to make a few pesos? Maybe if my ther had been a real father to me—but truly he was as worthless as e rest. And anyway, you're *not* in this business, I am."
"What happens to you happens to me."
"I hope not. Because those *madrinas* are surely going to fill my belly th lead."
"Don't talk like this."
"What other way should I talk? Here, eat something."
"I can't eat something. Not when you're like this. Patricio, you were ways so smart. Figure a way out of this."
"How smart was it to get involved with Jorge? You know what his ends, the Big Pockets, say NAFTA stands for?"
"I don't care what they say it stands for."

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"They say it means Narcotics Are Freely Transported Anywhere." H paused and stared off at the horizon a moment. Then he spoke aga "They'll come for Jorge one day, those *madrinas*. The Big Pockets w grow tired of him. Not that it's any consolation."

He ate some bread and cheese, washed it down with water from t jug. He still has an appetite, she thought. That's something anyw But he'd always been a good eater, a big fork man, and yet he remain slim and sinewy. "Like my father," he'd told her. The Irishman wh given him his blue eyes.

The night came down. He said: "Did you bring the matches?"

"Yes. Did you think I'd forget?"

"Come. I'll show you what I need them for."

There was a church at the other end of the village—little more th a chapel really, roofless and abandoned like everything else. He to her hand and led her to it through the darkness. It still had a wood door, but one of the hinges had gone and it sat at an angle. He push it aside, then lit a match.

"It gets cold up here at night, Barbara, and I only had the one bla ket. Then I found these in the basement—there must be a hundred them down there—and figured a way to keep warm."

He bent and applied the match and a candle came to life. Then bent and lit another.

"The Zapatistas used the basement here to store weapons. Not the new Zapatistas with their Subcommander Marcos, but the original on who followed Emilio in 1913. They're the ones who must have left the here—a whole sackful of them."

And all the time lighting new candles until the whole floor seem covered with them—all but a blank space right in the middle.

"That's where I sleep," he told her. And she felt like screami because he must look just like a corpse as he lay there—as if he we practicing the role for the *madrinas*.

"You'd be surprised how much heat these candles put out. But wha wrong? You've gone white as a sheet."

"Put them out!" she screamed. "Put them out! Don't you see wh you've been doing? You've been laying yourself out for a funeral!"

He grabbed her and held her while she shook in his arms.

"Put them out," she whispered desperately into his shoulder.

He extinguished the candles and took her back to the place where t food was. Then he covered her with a blanket and lay down beside h and held her till she grew calm again.

"Those candles," he began.

"I don't want to hear about them," she said sharply.

"But you'd better. But maybe later—hey?"

"Never."

He continued to hold her. She was in one of those rare moods wh she didn't want to talk but she wanted him to talk just to hear t sound of his voice. Oh, how they knew each other and how to respond

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ch other. Since children almost—hating and loving and then only ving but fighting anyway because that was their temperament. Or aybe only her temperament though she'd never admit it.

So he talked about anything that came to his head, and she shook metimes and was ashamed of it. Ashamed that she wasn't strong nen he needed her to be strong and not a burden. He pretended not to tice, but the way he held her, the way he caressed her, said that he as aware of every tremor.

There, under the open night sky, he began telling her about his ther, the wild Irishman who'd sired him without bothering to marry s mother. A painter who'd sold what canvases he could to the *turistas* the plaza, then, in drink or despair, slashed the rest with a palette ife. He'd heard them moaning sometimes in the other room, his other and that man who never paid any attention to him, and wonred if that was how they'd sounded the night they made him. "He had e great friend—an old Hungarian who'd come here after World War vo for the sun and to forget the past. They drank as much as they uld, whatever they could get their hands on—cheap wine, *aguardite*, hard American liquor—and the more they drank the wilder my ther got but the more calm the Hungarian became. So at the end of e night it was always he who brought my father home, like a kind ncle caring for a simpleminded nephew.

"Then one evening the police came and the Hungarian with them. ney showed articles of clothing to my mother and asked her to identify em. They'd been found in a rocky place along the shore where the rrent was swift and the water deep, and there was some sort of unken note with them that made no sense in either Spanish or nglish. This man has suicided himself, the old Hungarian said. There n be no doubt. But small as I was, I still saw that there were no shoes that pile. And why would a man intent on drowning himself leave hind his pants and shirt and underwear but no shoes? The Hungarn sensed that I had seen something and got me outside and took me a nearby store where he bribed me with sweets. And I thought: At st I got something from that bastard who sired me. I got these sweets.

"Later, until he died himself, the old Hungarian would slip me money nd pretend that it came from my father. But it came from him—my ther never gave me nothing. Well, maybe he gave me two things, both them by mistake. And if I get lucky maybe I'll use those two things to tfox the *madrinas*. They're only hired killers, after all, but I've got e blood of Toltec warriors and mad Irishmen in my veins."

He lapsed into silence. She slept some, came awake, slept again. But ways *he* was awake and staring out into the starry night and his ind was working, working. She could almost feel it trembling within m like a motor. But what it grappled with—the *madrinas* or the past at had brought him to this place—she could not know.

Once he spoke again, more to the night than to her. "I don't miss it—e bright new car we had to get rid of because the *madrinas* were sure

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to spot it, the hard American dollars. I don't care to be a saint, but least I understand now why they went out into the desert. To fr themselves, hey? Well, I've done the same thing."

Then she heard it on the edge of her dreams—and he heard it, tc and touched her and woke her. An engine growling along in low gea He got to his feet and she rose up, too. He stood there, chuffing h breath as if someone had hit him a great blow. Then his wits seemed remember who their master was.

He grabbed the burlap bag and dumped part of its contents on tl ground, just cast them there like a sign. Then he thrust the bag in her arms and gripped her shoulder.

"Remember the place I showed you above the village? The depressic beyond the lip of the hill?"

"I remember."

"Go there and lie low. Here, take the jug of water, too."

"What if it's not them?"

"Then it's somebody else. What difference does it make? You must l out of here. This is my affair alone."

"No. I'll stay. I'll help you."

"You help me best by getting out of sight. If they find you they'll u you. Don't you understand? They'll use you against me. And afterwar God knows what they'll do to you."

"Rape? Do you think I'm afraid of that when they might kill you?"

"Ah, rape—that's not their style. But who can repair a bullet in tl brain? Now do as I tell you—I beg you. This is difficult enough."

He turned away, and after a moment she turned away, too. She four the path up the hill and followed it in the starlight. Far down the trac she could see the red wash of the brake lights of the vehicle. And amb too sometimes. They were driving up on their parking lights so as not alert them—as if the sound of their engine wasn't enough. Ai—it wa them all right. Who else would trouble to come out here? And wh other vehicle but a four-wheel drive Cherokee could climb the stee track? Certainly not that joke of a Fiesta.

When she reached the top of the hill she paused to look back at tl village. Patricio's dark figure was moving among the abandone houses, doing this thing and that, she didn't know what. Then he wa at the door to the church. He went inside, and a moment later the fir candle flared. Then more candles—a perfect blaze of them. She had premonition then that he was going to lie down amongst them like corpse—just as she'd imagined him—and wait for the *madrinas*. Tha would be his gesture, the way he would be remembered in the ballads.

She stood there trembling. She wanted to run back to the village an pull him out of there. Then the Cherokee arrived at the top of the trac and there was no more time.

She found the depression and dropped into its shadow. Then sh peered out over the rim. Down below, the *madrinas* had alread climbed out of their vehicle. They stood on either side of it, alert, bu

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sure of themselves as well—as if they owned this place. One of them had his teeth clamped around a small cigar. He puffed on it and the tip glowed red.

Their coats were open, and now the one on the left took a big, gleaming pistol out of his belt—yes, even in the starlight it shone silver and deadly, like one of those movie guns that Schwarzenegger and Stallone carry. The other one took out a similar pistol and worked the receiver and chambered a round. The awful, metallic sound it made—she wanted to stop her ears. This was real, this was happening.

Her eyes swung back to the church. Patricio had closed the door and no light showed. But if you were high above, as she was, and could look down somewhat, you could see a faint interior glow.

The two men spoke to each other in low tones. They might be confident, but they still didn't like this place. There were too many spots for their quarry to hide and all the dark hills in the world for him to run away to. But Patricio had chosen to stay, and now he made that point clear by sending something to the ground in one of the abandoned houses.

Instantly the two men were moving. One crouched beside the Cherokee and thrust his weapon straight out in front of him. The other flattened himself against a wall near the stone bench. Patricio had left the church then, but where in all those shadows was he?

The men were listening to something—a rustle of cloth maybe—at any rate, some faint sound of movement. They made hand gestures to each other. Then in another moment they were in motion again. They went through the doorway of one of the houses, one high, one low, their pistols covering different portions of the single room beyond. Nothing—for an instant, two instants—nothing at all. Then a flash at the glassless window and the *whang* of a shot—like a hammer coming down on a metal sheet.

Her heart stopped. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it seemed to stop for an entire minute. Then a dark figure moved like a shadow between two of the houses. The *madrinas* boiled out of the doorway. One circled left, one circled right. Now the houses hid them from her, and they hid that shadow she'd seen as well.

She tried to remember a prayer—any prayer—but her mind was as dry as her throat.

Shuffling sounds amongst the houses. Feet sliding sideways without lifting themselves from the ground. Then silence. Absolute silence. She could feel the blood pounding through her head. Feel it in her eyes so that they seemed to throb with the strain of watching.

I should've got my own pistol, she thought. I should've killed those dogs in the street the first time I saw them and spared myself this.

And still no sounds in the village below as the seconds attenuated themselves like wires being stretched to the snapping point.

Then there was the *whang* of a shot. Then two *whangs* in quick succession. The flash of the muzzles threw brief light into the dark spaces

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between the houses. Flash and gone—like that. Then flash-flash and the metallic echo carrying across the hills.

A figure detached itself from the shadows. It ran crookedly across the open space before the church. When it reached the door, it more or less collapsed against it. One hand went to the adobe wall for support and left a splotch there like blood. The door was shoved aside, and the tiny flames of the candles—dozens and dozens of them—threw light out against the darkness. The figure rolled inside, disappeared. And now the *madrinas* came loping—dark hunters with silver weapons in their hands. They threw themselves up against the wall on either side of the church door. One of them pointed out the splotch and said something. The other nodded. They went through the door—same as before—high, low, pistols pointed in opposite directions. They fired almost instantly, but this time the flashes were lost in the candlelight. Each shot brought a sob of pain from Barbara's throat.

They came back out. Inside, candles had been knocked over, probably by Patricio in his mad flight. Now a blaze had started—that old wooden floor and anything else that would burn. One of the men stood guard a dozen feet from the door with a pistol in his hand. The other took a foldup cellular phone from his pocket and extended the antenna. Soon he was talking into it in low tones.

The fire spread. The interior of the church became a mass of flames. The one on guard put away his pistol and took out a cigar. He made a rude joke and the one with the cellular phone laughed.

She rose to her feet, not caring whether she was seen or not. She was trembling in every limb and tears of anger and despair coursed down her face. He was in there. He was dying—and there was nothing she could do about it.

Then a hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down into the shadow, and another hand closed over her mouth so she wouldn't cry out.

"It's me," a familiar voice whispered. "Did you think I didn't have a plan?"

Then added: "I just wasn't sure it would work."

She saw the *madrinas* one last time. It was in the side mirror of a bus idling away in the Plaza Municipal. They were seated halfway back, her in a scarf that hid her hair and him in a funny hat that made him look like a *turisto*.

The *madrinas* had just come out of an expensive restaurant and were hitching up their pants and lighting cigars. They'd done their job—hey? Now it was time to enjoy themselves.

From where Patricio was seated he couldn't see them, and she didn't tell him that they were there. On the hike into town he'd explained about the business of the church. How he'd deliberately slashed the palm of his left hand—it had a white bandage on it now—so he could leave splotches of blood where they'd see them. "So they'd think they'd wounded me," he'd said. Then he'd huddled like a man in pain at

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the top of the broken basement steps, waiting for them.

"Those big-caliber pistols—they've got a kick. It's very hard to hit anything with them more than a few feet away. So I took a chance and didn't roll backward till they fired. And at the same time I banged down the steps I yanked a line I'd rigged and the candles went over like ninepins. I'd poured paraffin from my camp stove all over the wooden floor and right away there was a terrific blaze. Those damned *madrinas* didn't know what happened. They thought they'd put hot lead in me and that if I wasn't dead yet the flames would soon make me that way. But the Zapatistas had made an escape shaft and I used it to get out of there. I did to them what my father had done to me and my mother. Made myself look dead and then walked off in my own shoes."

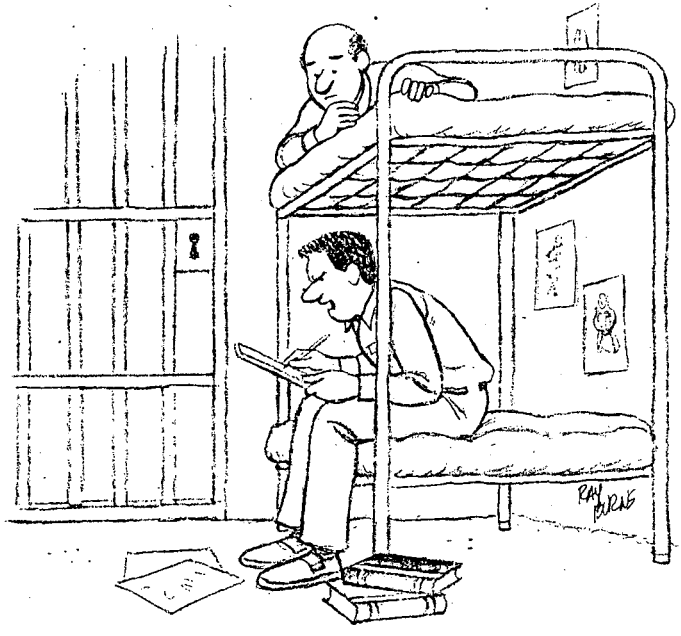
He showed her something else that related to his father. "The damned fool signed his name to my birth certificate. He must have been drunk at the time because he surely never meant to acknowledge me. And a year ago, thanks to that, I obtained this thing." An Irish passport with his real name in it—the name that father he despised had given him. Patrick O'Hearn—the same as his own.

"We can go anywhere with this." He laughed. "Even Ireland itself."

"But what would we do there?"

"We'd do something. Isn't that enough?"

The bus began moving. She glanced a final time into the outside mirror. The *madrinas* were still standing on the sidewalk with their cigars. One of them had removed his sunglasses, and his eyes were narrowed against the glare. He looked like a well-groomed rat blinded by the sun. ●



"I'm filing another civil rights suit. The canteen sold me creamy peanut butter when I asked for chunky!"

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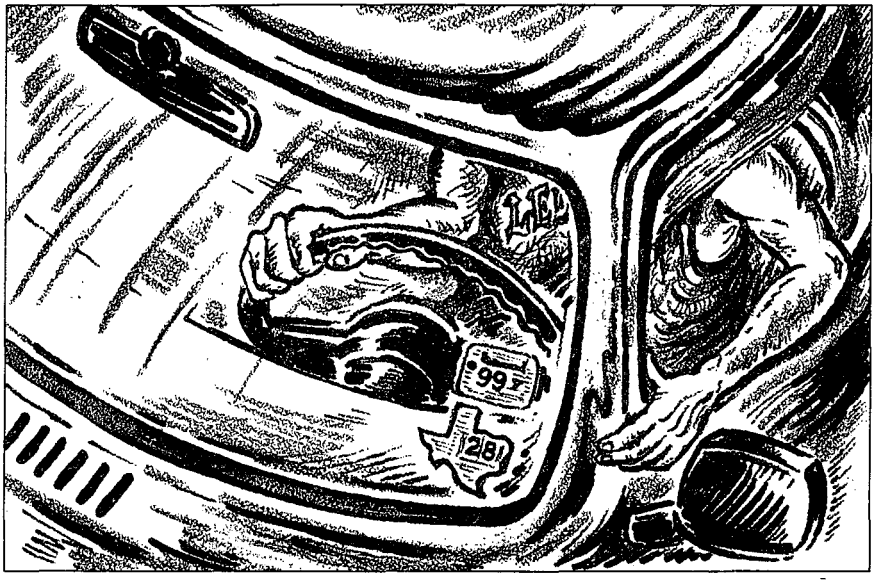

Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Safest Little Town in Texas

by Jeremiah Healy

Alone in the stolen '92 Ford, Polk Greshen checked the rearview mirror. No cars behind him, period, much less one with bubble-lights on its roof. First good omen since he'd killed that gas-station attendant over the Oklahoma line.

"Damn-fool beaner," thought Polk, focusing back on the road in front of him. "I tell him, 'All right, I'll be needing your cash,' and he makes like, '*Señor, no hablo* the English.' Only the beaner'd have to be blind not to see the nine-millimeter in my hand, me waving it at the register. What'd he think I meant? But no, the man has to be a hero, try for the tire iron he had on a shelf behind some oil cans. Well, now he ain't never gonna '*hablo* the English.'" Or anything else, far as that goes.

Polk had boosted the Ford from a movie-house parking lot five miles from the station, so he figured it was still a pretty safe vehicle in terms of being connected to the killing. Radio didn't work, but the air did—praise the Lord. Also, he'd found a set of keys under the driver's seat

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that fit. "Damn-fool owner, might 's well leave them sticking in the ignition." Only thing was, the Oklahoma police could have the license plate on their hot list by now, and Polk was pretty sure those computer things could run the tags on any car they stopped.

So after killing the attendant, Polk had driven real conservative-like, getting on U.S. 283 south and crossing the Red River into Texas north of Vernon. Maybe an Oklahoma stolen car wouldn't get onto the hot list for Texas, and he could always hole up with a cousin lived just outside Hobbs, New Mexico, which should be due southwest from where he was right now. "About got enough money from the beaner's till to see me through gas and food, long's I don't go hog-wild on things." Polk also figured it was smart to stick to the smaller roads, and so far he'd been right.

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Until the Ford's goddamn oil light came on.

Polk used the heel of his hand to wham at the light, but that didn't do any good. Pulling over to the side of the road, he got out. The heat was like standing on top of a griddle, but Polk didn't plan to be in it long. He went to the trunk of the car, using the key that didn't fit the ignition to open the lid. A rat-eared blanket, two wrenches, and . . . a bird cage? Would you look at that.

But no oil. Figures.

Polk slammed down the lid. "Should of stole some from that beaner back at the gas station. It was an omen, for sure, him having that tire iron by the cans there."

The air frying his lungs, Polk tried to guestimate where he was at. Hour or more east of Lubbock, probably. But he hadn't seen a soul along the road, not a house, nothing for quite a while. Looking west, there seemed to be some kind of signpost only half a mile on.

Back behind the wheel, Polk drove toward the signpost. Sure enough, it marked a small intersection, the arrow aiming north with "Bibby, 2 miles." Better bet than taking a chance on civilization suddenly sprouting up in front of him.

Muttering under his breath at the oil light, Polk Greshen turned right.

"Well, well. Do you believe it?"

Polk expected Bibby to be no more than a crossroads, lucky to have a

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general store with a pump outside it. Instead, just about the time he could make out a clump of buildings in the distance, there was this real nice mini-billboard on the side of the road:

WELCOME TO BIBBY

THE SAFEST LITTLE TOWN IN TEXAS

POP. 327

Another favorable impression as he approached the first few buildings along the main street. Old and mostly wood, except for the bank, which was yellow brick. But everything all spruced up with new paint and bright little signs like BIBBY CAFE and COLE'S HARDWARE and so on. Good omen, for a change. All the way at the end of the street, Polk thought he could see POLICE on a bigger sign with something else writ smaller beneath it, but it was too far away to read. "Don't think I'll be visiting that end of town, anyway, no-thank-you-sir."

There was almost no vehicle traffic, only a couple of people walking heat-slow past the storefronts. Fortunately, in the next block Polk spotted a filling station—not a national company, just "GAS"—but it had a couple of service bays. He pulled into the station near the pumps, and a mechanic came out from one of the bays, wiping grease off his hands with a rag.

The man was dressed in a white T-shirt and denim overalls, all kinds of things sagging in his pockets. Polk thought he must be just about dying from the temperature, though the mechanic gave no notice of it walking over to the Ford.

Polk glanced down at his own clothes. New, tooled boots; sharp, stone-washed jeans; and a Led Zeppelin tank-top from that Tulsa rockshop, the nine millimeter barely a lump where he'd stuck it in his belt under the top. "I'll probably look mighty city to these folks."

The man's overalls had a name patch on the left breast. "Sid," was what it said.

Without turning off the engine, Polk looked at him. "Sid, I'll be needing some oil."

A nod. "What weight you got in her now?"

Polk could hot-wire a car, but he didn't ever have one long enough to think of such things. "Not sure about that."

Another nod. "Your light come on, did it?"

"About three miles back, give or take."

Sid nodded again. "Let me take a look under her."

Polk had run some cons himself in the past, so he sure could see one coming at him now. He got out of the Ford, trying not to breathe the heat too deeply, and squatted down as Sid did about the sorriest push-up you've ever seen, face staring under the chassis.

"See that there?"

Polk used his hand to brace himself, nearly burning the skin right off the palm on Sid's hot asphalt. Following the mechanic's pointing finger,

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he could see the kind of drip-drip-drip you get from an old faucet. Only it wasn't water.

"Oil, huh?"

"That's what they call it." Sid got to his feet like a lame bear. "I'm gonna have to put her up on the rack, try and plug the leak."

"How much?"

"Won't know that till I get her up there."

Polk figured he could kiss what was left of the beaner's money goodbye. "How long, then?"

A sweep of the hand toward the other cars in the lot. "Got four ahead of you."

Polk considered grabbing this hick by the straps on his overalls, shaking him till he thought some about changing his priorities. But Polk was a wanted man driving a stolen car, and the less attention he drew, the better.

"Any place to eat?"

"Cafe. You must've passed her a few blocks back, way you were driving."

"Thanks." Saying it kind of flat.

As Polk began to walk, he adjusted the gun in his belt for strolling instead of driving. Passing two of the cars ahead of him for servicing, he automatically glanced at their steering wheels. Both had their keys still in the ignition.

Despite the temperature, Polk smiled, talking softly to himself. "Well, well. Old Sid tries to hold me up, leastways I can get myself some substitute transportation."

Heading south toward the cafe, he noticed keys in the ignition of most every parked car on his side of the street and felt his smile getting wider. "My kind of town, Bibby is."

"Afternoon."

As the screened door slapped closed behind him, Polk looked at the woman who'd spoken. She was dressed in one of those old-fashioned waitress outfits and a bulky apron. Chubby, with brassy hair and too much makeup, her nametag read "Lurlene." Polk thought about how convenient it was, everybody sporting their names for him, but he wondered how come they needed to, since in a town of 327, you'd think everybody would know each other. "Maybe their way of remembering who they are themselves," thought Polk, and laughed.

"What's so funny," said Lurlene. Not sassy, just curious-like.

"Nothing." Polk slid onto one of the chrome stools, resting his elbows on the Formica counter under a ceiling fan that might have been put up there in the year one. He glanced around the cafe. Old skinny couple—wearing sweaters, dear Lord—in one of the booths, young momma and her yard-ape in another. Four stools away, the only other customer at the counter was a fat fart pushing sixty, his rump overhanging the seat cushion, a fraying straw Stetson angled back on his head.

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"Get you something?"

Polk looked at Lurlene. "Coffee. And a menu."

She gave him a piece of orange paper, the items hand-writ on it, then poured some coffee from a pot into a white porcelain cup with a million little cracks on its surface, like a spider web.

"Lurlene, honey?" said the fat fart.

"Yes, Chief?"

Polk froze as she moved with the coffee pot to the other end of the counter. Then Polk, as casual as he could, kind of scoped out the man who might be a police.

Talking to Lurlene like she was a schoolgirl, but wanting to change a twenty. Polk noticed there was no gun on his belt. Maybe the fire chief? Un-unh. As the fat fart turned, Polk could see a peace officer's badge on the khaki shirt. Now what kind of damn fool wears a badge without toting something to back it up?

Lurlene came toward Polk, pawing under the counter for what turned out to be her pocketbook. Opening it, she shook her head. "Sorry, Chief. And I know there's not enough in the register yet."

Polk looked up at the clock on the wall. 1:15 in the P.M. Must do one hell of a business, not enough change in the drawer after lunchtime to so much as cash a twenty. Briefly, he thought about helping the lawman out, and almost laughed again.

"Well," said the chief, "I'll just ask Mary over to the bank. Be right back."

Polk watched the fat fart take about thirty seconds to make it off his stool and waddle out the door toward the yellow-brick building across the street.

Lurlene spoke to the back of Polk's head. "Decide on what you'll be having?"

He turned his face toward her. "Hamburger, medium. Fries."

"You got it."

Lurlene went through a swinging door, and he could hear her voice repeating his order. Left her pocketbook open on the counter, in plain view and an arm's reach from a total stranger.

When the waitress came back out, Polk said, "Hey, you forgot something here."

"What else you want?" Again not sassy, now just confused.

"It's not what I want." Polk gestured, feeling charitable. "Your pocketbook. Shouldn't be leaving it out like that."

Lurlene laughed and waved him off. "Oh, that's all right. Bibby's the safest little town in Texas."

Polk thought about the billboard he'd seen. "That why your police don't even carry a gun?"

"The chief? Well, he don't really need to."

"Kind of odd, don't you think?"

"Not for Bibby. The chief used to be the guard, over to our bank? At least until the bank realized it didn't really need a guard. Seemed a

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shame to have Harry—that's his name, 'Harry'—be out of a job, so we kind of voted him police chief. Only he don't have that much chiefing to do, since he don't have any officers under him. But somebody's got to process the paperwork those folks over to Austin make us file, and that keeps Harry just real busy."

Polk sipped his coffee, but he was really tasting all this information. A police chief without a gun or other officers, a bank without a guard. And himself, Polk Greshen, sitting here with a broke-down stolen car, a passing need for money, and a nine mil' under his tank-top. Omens. Omens just everywhere you looked.

He said, "Sounds like y'all don't have much crime around here."

"None, really. Not since we also voted to—"

At which point the cafe door slapped shut again, and fat-fart Harry the Chief returned to the counter, easing his haunches down on the stool he'd left and allowing as how he could use maybe one more cup of Lurlene's coffee before heading back to the office.

Which sounded to Polk like fine timing. Yes, fine timing indeed.

Polk was kind of clock-watching. Ten minutes since the chief left the cafe and started walking up the street toward his station. The hamburger and fries Lurlene had brought weren't half bad, though Polk realized his immediate prospects just might've brightened the meal some.

The young momma and her kid got up to leave their booth, the old skinny couple in their sweaters having teetered out a little before that. Polk decided he didn't really want to be Lurlene's only customer in the cafe. You spend too much time alone with a person, they tend to remember your face that much better.

What Polk figured: I finish up here, cross the street, and slip into the bank. With any luck at all, won't be no crowd there, given how dead old Bibby seems to be. I flash the nine mil' under some teller's nose, then take what they got in cash and run to Sid's garage. Only a few blocks, and either he's got the Ford ready, or I boost one of the others. Hell, this town, I could jump in practically any car parked along the street, find the keys still in the ignition.

"More coffee?"

He looked up at Lurlene, poised with the pot over his cup.

"Just the check."

After leaving a dollar tip—right generous, too—Polk got off his stool and ambled outside, not wanting to appear like he was in a hurry just yet. The young momma and her kid drove by in a Chevy pickup heavy on the primer, but the old skinny couple were sitting on a shaded bench a block toward the gas station. The woman jawing away, the man looking to be falling asleep. "Can't hardly blame him," thought Polk.

The rest of the street was almost deserted, Polk having to wait for only one car to go by before crossing to the bank. He entered the double

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doors, and it was dark enough inside that he had to let his eyes adjust some to the room.

High ceiling, with polished mahogany along the walls. The business counter was made of the same, three of those old-fashioned teller's cages like . . . like the bird-thing he'd found in the trunk of the Ford. Another omen.

One colored girl, maybe twenty or so, stood behind the cage closest to the doors. There was nobody else in the place, and no sound, either.

"Well, well," thought Polk. "All by herself for true, and not even bullet-proof glass between us."

He walked up to the girl's cage, a little placard with "MARY" on the counter. Goddamn, but this is one well-identified town—Polk remembering Chief Harry saying that name back at the cafe.

"Help you, sir?"

Polk grinned, reaching under his tank-top. "You surely can, Miss Mary. I'll be needing some cash for my friend here."

The girl looked down at his side of the counter as Polk brought the gun's muzzle up, pointed dead center on her chest.

"You getting the picture, Miss Mary?"

"Yessir."

Said it real calm. Had to give her credit, didn't seem even a bitty-bit scared.

"All your money, now. And don't be pushing no alarm buttons, neither."

"We don't have none to push."

Polk couldn't believe this town. Wished he'd found it sooner in his life.

"The money, Miss Mary."

He watched as she opened a cash drawer and started stacking bills in front of him. Polk wasn't the best at doing sums real quick, but he could see lots of twenties and even some fifties in with the others. Might not have to hole-up with his cousin in New Mexico after all.

The girl stopped, closing the drawer.

"That it?" said Polk.

"Less'n you want the coins, too."

He grinned. Genuine brave, this Miss Mary. "No, they'd just slow me down." He gathered the cash, stuffing it into the pockets of his jeans. "Now, I'm gonna walk through your door there, and if you just sit tight and don't do nothing stupid, my partner out front won't have to shoot you. Got all that?"

"Yessir."

"Good. Pleasure doing business with you, Miss Mary."

Polk backed up a few steps, then turned to open the door, sticking the nine mil' back under his shirt.

From behind him, Mary said, "Sir?"

Polk turned back to see her leveling a pistol at him.

He barely had time to duck before the first round went off, deafening him and grazing his upper left arm, the flesh feeling like it bumped into

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a branding iron. Yowling, Polk barged through the doors just as a second round from Mary's pistol lodged in the jamb next to his head.

Outside, Polk drew his own weapon, looking up to see Lurlene at the door of the cafe, the old skinny couple rousting themselves from their bench. No problem, once I . . .

Out of the corner of his eye, Polk saw Lurlene's hand come up from the bulging apron, a small black— Goddamn, no!

Her first bullet whistled past his shoulder as he broke into a loose-limbed jog, the boots not really made for it, his legs feeling like they were taking an awful long time to get the message from his brain. He'd gotten about abreast of the old skinny couple when—

No. No, this can't be.

The man was down on one knee, sighting a long-barreled revolver, while the woman had a cigarette lighter in her— Wait, a derringer?

They opened up on him, too, and Polk felt something like a hammer whack him in the right thigh. He nearly fell, afraid to look down and maybe see his own— No, can't think like that. Got to get the car.

After what seemed to Polk like a mile of running through sand, Sid was there, just ahead, by one of his gas pumps. Closing the driver's door of the Ford, as though he'd just rolled it out from the bay.

Already gasping for breath, Polk began waving to him with the nine mil'. "Sid, Sid . . ."

The mechanic waved back with one hand, dipping the other into one of the sagging pockets in his overalls and drawing a snub-nose belly-gun.

"No!" Polk knew he was screaming as he dived to the pavement, the bullets whining in ricochet around him.

Struggling back to his feet, the pain in his thigh growing bad—real bad—Polk willed himself up the street. He could hear the sound of people coming after him, different kinds of shoes making different kinds of noises. "The police . . ." he thought. "I make it . . . to the station . . . Chief Harry . . . stop this . . . crazy . . ."

Hobbling like a man in a three-legged race, Polk got to within fifty feet of sanctuary when he felt something hit him in the back. More like a baseball bat than a hammer this time, and he pitched forward hard, his weapon clattering a body-length away from his hand.

The shoe sounds behind him were getting closer.

With the last of his strength, Polk managed to lift his face off the pavement, see Chief Harry standing with fists on his hips in the station's doorway. The smaller lettering under "POLICE" arced above the peace officer's head.

The sign read:

Bibby, Texas

Where every citizen has a permit to carry.

Polk Greshen thought about all the paperwork that might cause, and why Chief Harry might be too busy to worry about toting a gun himself. ●

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THE SECRET

by Eileen Dewhurst

The weather was so hot in Provence at the time Monica Millican drowned herself in her twin sister's swimming pool that her sister—the widowed Comtesse de Chameux-Periard—persuaded Monica's husband Roland, via a telephone call to England, that it would be prudent for his wife to be cremated where she had died. A memorial service, the Comtesse suggested, could be held later at home.

Not, of course, that the funeral could take place in either France or England to the usual time scale, in view of the necessity for a postmortem examination and an inquest. But at least the local morgue had the best freezing facilities in the area, and the Comtesse, with her unique local influence, was able to arrange the funeral for the day immediately following the body's release.

In view of Monica's state of mind at the time of her death—she had had to resign from her teaching job and had already made an attempt to take her life in her own bathroom—Roland was required to be present at the inquest. As his French was so poor, he was given an interpreter through whom he was able to explain to the satisfaction of the coroner that his wife's death was the tragically logical outcome of her behaviour over recent months. The coroner clicked his tongue sympathetically when Roland added that Monica had in fact been visiting her sister in an attempt to free herself from what had so sadly proved to be a clinical depression. A verdict was brought in of *Suicide alors qu'elle n'était pas responsable de ses actes.* "Suicide while the balance of her mind was disturb-èd," as the interpreter, seeing Roland's bewildered face, hissed into his ear.

"C'était gentille, cette pauvre Madame Monica!" sobbed the cook,

Eileen Dewhurst is primarily a novelist, only occasionally a short story writer, and in her stories she appears to revert to themes that she has treated at greater length in her novels. Crime writer and editor Martin Edwards once commented, "Dewhurst (is preoccupied) with questions of identity." He notes that her first novel, *Death Came Smiling* (Robert Hale/'75), was concerned with "identical twin sisters who have very different characters"—a subject she returns to here.

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hen the Comtesse went into the kitchen on her return from the court. *Et comme enfants, ces deux petites! . . . ont du être mignonnes . . . y a ne photo, Madame?*"

The Comtesse found one after a search, and when she had shown it to ıe cook and to Roland she took it away and looked at it herself. At the vo shyly smiling little girls who were Madeleine and Monica Thomp-ɔn; clean, tidy, and precisely alike.

Which they never had been, of course.

As she gave instructions to her staff, wrote the letters and made the ɛlephone calls arising out of her sister's death, moved between the cool ıade of the house and the dazzling sunshine of the terrace in intermit-ɛntly successful attempts to avoid the brother-in-law she disliked but ɔ whom she had been obliged to offer hospitality, the Comtesse found erself unable to stop thinking about those two little girls. Monica the ne who had hung back, Madeleine the one who had led the way, the ne who had been first to tell the time, tie her shoelaces, write her ame. Even when Monica turned out to be the academic one, Madeleine ad continued somehow to outshine her—perhaps because academic chievement was not something by which Madeleine set much store. or her, it was more important to be quick-witted, lovely to look at, xciting to be with. And married to a man with wealth and influence.

By the time Monica went up to Oxford, Madeleine was already estab-shing herself as a model. Whether she would have reached the top of er profession no one would ever know, because on a visit to Oxford to ɛe her sister, Madeleine met Félix Brion, elder son of the Comte de 'hameux-Periard, who was on a postgraduate course in comparative state management, and embarked very soon afterwards on her second areer as his wife.

Monica, meanwhile, who had never developed charisma, drifted into lacklustre affair with a fellow undergraduate reading Mechanical ngineering, and married him a year after they had both gained Sec-nd Class Honours degrees.

Following her marriage, Monica continued to teach; but following ers, Madeleine, at her husband's request, ceased to model. Her ıther-in-law died soon after his elder son's wedding, and on inheriting ıe title Félix dedicated his working life to the extensive estate sur-ɔunding the family château in the valley of the Loire, an activity in 'hich his wife had been gratified to assist him.

Neither marriage had been blessed with children. Monica had a cou-le of miscarriages and Madeleine never became pregnant—to the infi-ite disappointment of the Comte, who knew he had terminal cancer ɔr some time before telling his wife and had hoped to leave a son and eir behind him.

So when he died, the château, the estate, and the title passed to his ounger brother André. Not too much to Madeleine's chagrin: She was ole heir to Les Pigeonniers, the property in Provence, and to her hus-and's personal fortune, and although she had enjoyed assisting him in

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his running of the château and the estate, she lacked the energy ar the motivation to relish the idea of shouldering the responsibility them on her own. And, as André showed no interest whatsoever in th female sex, there was unlikely to come a time when she would b obliged to insert the word *douairière*—dowager—into her title.

Madeleine had been the Comtesse de Chameux-Periard for fiftee years at the time of her sister's death, and Monica was in the thi teenth year of her marriage to Roland Millican. During their marrie lives the twins spoke to each other on the telephone every few month sent each other birthday and Christmas presents, occasionally me Over the years, the Millicans spent a few holidays at Les Pigeonnier but Roland was the only one who enjoyed them, and the sisters' regula meetings took place in London, where Madeleine went twice a year t shop and see friends. Monica, of course, always invited her twin to sta with her and Roland at their home outside Birmingham, but Madelein regularly excused herself on the grounds that her time in England wa short and the other people she wanted to see, the things she wanted t do, were in or near London.

Monica had always gone willingly to their meetings, the Comtess mused as she moved restlessly about her house and garden. Partly, course, because she enjoyed the rare break from Roland and the nigh at the Dorchester to which Madeleine always treated her. (*Poor cou* the Comtesse thought, with a rush of contemptuous sympathy, *please with so little. Poor weak, frightened, stupid cow!*) But also because their tacit agreement that occasional meetings were necessary for th preservation of their secret.

The secret that, despite being identical twins, the sisters did not lik one another.

Monica had always made it plain to Madeleine that she considere her shallow and superficial, while trying to hide her envy of her sister place in the sun. No less obviously, Madeleine had no time for what sh saw as Monica's narrow life, and pitied her for her dullness and he boring husband with the lascivious gleam in his eye on those rare occa sions when he encountered his wife's glamorous sister.

But there was a social imperative with which both women ha always felt it prudent to comply: Twins were supposed to feel them selves in a uniquely close relationship, particularly if they were ident cal.

Not that that had been so obvious since they grew up, the Comtess reflected as she sat in her black at the funeral luncheon, murmurin responses to the people who came up to her to commiserate—not great many, as she had lived somewhat reclusively since her husband' death. Monica had met all the members of her sister's small circle du ing the couple of weeks of holiday that had preceded her death, an several of them had remarked on how unlike one another the twin looked, forbearing of course to put into words the most obvious reason

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hy this was so: Madeleine's fashion sense and Monica's lack of it; adeleine's verve and Monica's troubled stare . . .

But today a few of them mentioned that stare.

"Yes," the Comtesse agreed. "Monica *was* troubled, I'm afraid. You ıtsed it? . . . Yes, I was aware of it too, but I never dreamed . . ." Here ıe paused to raise a scrap of white lawn to her lips. "I hoped she was ıjoying herself . . . beginning to recover . . ." That was where she ıoked to a standstill. Not really having to fake her distress, because ıe was so wary of her final evening with Roland.

He came over to her the moment the last guests had taken their ave.

"You must be tired, Madeleine."

She got to her feet, wishing he was not standing so close to her. "I'm red of these clothes, and I'm glad it's all over." Almost all over. "I'm ›ing to change. Don't forget this, Roland." She went to the side table here she had placed the urn when it had been delivered by an acolyte ıring the last stages of the funeral feast. Ashes were not usually pre-ɛnted to the relatives on the day of cremation, but the Comtesse was ıxious to be rid of Roland at the earliest possible moment and had ɛen financially persuasive.

She picked up the urn, which, to her distaste, felt slightly warm, put into his unwilling hands. "Drinks on the terrace at half-past seven."

The Comtesse prepared herself for the evening with particular care, ıd in her most elegant manner. She did not wish to encourage the .eam in Roland's eye, but it was preferable to his other possible reac-on.

Out on the terrace, where the brilliant colours of the day were paling › pastel under the darkening sky, she poured herself a stiff drink and ıt down to await him, realising as she saw the glass tremble in her and how everything since her sister's death had taken a toll on her— ıe early-morning discovery of the body facedown in the pool, the shock aves through the house and village, the questioning, the inquest, the ffort to appear more upset than she was and preserve the secret. oland under her roof for a week had been the worst ordeal of all, but lthough the lustful gleam had appeared from time to time the omtesse could not so far complain of his behaviour.

Tonight, though, was his last night at Les Pigeonniers.

The last time he and she would ever have to meet.

"Ah! Roland! Come and sit down. After you've helped yourself to what ou want." She waved her hand at the glass trolley with its array of ottles. "Have you been packing?"

A swift, keen look. "Not packing, no. Not yet. Not wanting to see the vidence around me that I'm on the way home, to tell you the truth. I on't suppose I should say this, Madeleine, but I've been very comfort-ble here."

"People usually are." She had made a nestling movement into her

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lounge chair before deciding it might appear provocative. "But you'll l
glad everything's sorted."

"Yeah. Sure."

She watched him survey the bottles, select the scotch and generous
pour, throw in two ice cubes. Swirling his glass so that the ice clinke
he strolled over to the nearest of the other lounge chairs and thre
himself down.

"Ah! That's better! Old ticker been playing up a bit today. Has to l
the strain, I suppose. But I'm bearing up."

"Good for you, Roland."

What a wimp! the Comtesse thought. Seeing himself now as a desi
able male on the loose, but still the same pathetic Roland Millica
using the excuse of his dicky heart to tout for sympathy. Still the sam
meagre figure with the stooped shoulders, round pink tonsure, sma
mean mouth, and close-set suspicious eyes . . .

In which the lascivious gleam was back as he leaned towards th
Comtesse's chair.

The Comtesse's desire to be rid of him was suddenly so strong sh
could scarcely contain it. Dinginess seemed to spread physically fro
his unlovely body, casting a film over the sparkling landscape beyon
the terrace.

"You'll be glad to get home, Roland, get on with your life. I hope th
memorial service goes well, I'm sorry I don't feel up to being there." Th
Comtesse had no parents alive to be distressed by her nonattendanc
"And I'm sorry I failed to help Monica. I'll always feel that if she hadn
come to me she might still be with us."

"Forget it." Roland made a nestling movement in his turn. Th
Comtesse had never seen him so relaxed. "If she hadn't done it her
she'd have done it somewhere else. She'd made up her mind."

"Weren't you afraid . . . Didn't you wonder when you came home fro
work that you might find—"

"She'd promised to pull herself together. So I hoped . . ."

Hoped she might have broken her promise? She wouldn't put it pas
him. "Yes, of course. Well, I'll try not to feel guilty. And if she wasn
happy . . ."

"She should have been!" Roland exploded indignantly. His drin
splashed over the edge of his glass as his body jerked, and the Comtess
watched it spread like string across the creamy stone floor. "She ha
everything she wanted. A nice house—well, not on the same planet a
yours, of course, but a nice house—and a nice garden where sh
enjoyed working. Things weren't so easy when she stopped earning, bu
we didn't have to count every penny and I never complained."

"You feel she's let you down, don't you, Roland?" the Comtess
inquired softly.

"I . . . Well, yes, in a way I do, you know." There was admiration, too
now in the pale eyes. "You're very perceptive, Madeleine. And very
very beautiful." The light of lust was growing into a powerful beam, an

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the Comtesse had to suppress a physical recoil. "You know, I'm beginning to think I chose the wrong sister. But you were always so busy with other people. Rather more than you are these days, it seems to me."

Now the Comtesse had to suppress a terrible desire to laugh. "What do you mean, Roland?"

"I mean . . . I don't have to go home, you know. Well, I do, of course, for the time being, the memorial service and all that, and I suppose the look of things, but afterwards . . . I've a few weeks of holiday due to me." He was near enough to lean forward and place a hand on her bare knee. Her revulsion and disgust were so strong they made her choke, and she was able to move her knee without seeming to rebuff the hand as she searched for a tissue. "Oops!" he said. "Am I as bad as that?"

Roland in rare jesting mood made her think of a puppy panting its hope that a ball is about to be thrown for it to retrieve. "Look, Roland . . . Whatever I feel or don't feel doesn't come into it. How can I explain? I may look like a free woman, but I'm still a Chameux-Periard, and the Chameux-Periards guard their widowed family members. Ruthlessly. The way the Mafia guard theirs. You understand?" Grinning, the Comtesse drew a finger melodramatically across her throat. "I'm not saying my husband's family is on the wrong side of the law, but they have that in common with the first family of crime. Unless, of course," she went on, "a subsequent attachment is seen to be serious and honourable, when it can be approved by the family. This happens very rarely, and as you must realise, Roland, there can never be anything between you and me which could be seen in that light. All right?"

"All right, Madeleine, yes, of course." Roland drained his glass, looked at his watch, and rose to his feet. "Still half an hour before dinner, think I'll get my things together. It's an early flight."

"A good idea, Roland." And there was a chance he might follow it up by sending a message down to say he was having a bad reaction to the funeral and would she mind if he missed dinner and had a tray sent up to his room. . . .

Relaxing into her lounge chair, Monica Millican watched the disappearing figure of her husband and knew with relief and in triumph that the last and most dangerous hazard had been overcome.

She had always known she was capable of bringing it off, from the moment she had stood at her kitchen window that rainy morning in the school holidays looking down the narrow garden and realizing that her life as it was was not worth living. For the first time, from the lowest point even she had ever reached, she had squared up to fate and decided to bend it to her will. It had denied her Félix as a husband, but she would secure her place as his widow and his heir . . .

She had loved Félix and, she was sure, he had begun to love her. But then Madeleine had come to Oxford on a flying visit and swept him away with her. *You do understand, don't you, darling? We're made for each other. And it isn't as though you and he . . .*

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Not quite then, no, but it would have been.

With Félix gone, it hadn't seemed to matter to Monica whether it was Roland or anyone else. But she had been married for only a few weeks when she had begun to wish it was nobody. . . .

She threw her first wobbly the very evening she decided to take matters into her own hands. Not having the dinner ready when Roland got home from work, telling him she wished she was dead. She kept on telling him, and the following week she cut her wrists in the bathroom—crying so loudly as she did it that he was there to bind them up before she had done more than scratch them. Then she resigned from her job and went to a psychiatrist, and then it was on record that she was mentally disturbed.

She had never been tempted to let Roland into the secret, so she was able to suggest to him that going to see Madeleine might be of help.

Roland had seized on the idea. It just might do the trick, she had seen him thinking, and even if it didn't it would give him a few weeks without her and the strain she was putting on his dicky heart.

Madeleine, on the telephone, had obviously found it hard to believe that her sister could want to visit her, but after a pause for thought she said she supposed that at least the sunshine, the idleness, and the absence of Roland might be therapeutic, and told Monica to come if that was really what she wanted.

It had continued to be as easy. Monica presented herself in France as even more dull and dowdy than she was in England, and was amused to see how Madeleine's wary suntanned face relaxed when they met at the airport and she was assured that her sister would not be her rival. Madeleine's relief, in fact, had made her generous, and she had let Monica help herself to her shorts, bikinis, slips of dresses—all of which fit, as Monica had dieted discreetly to the specifications of her sister's most recent photographs.

After a couple of weeks Monica's skin, too, was a golden brown, and she wore Madeleine's emerald-green bikini the day she joined her in the pool for her regular dawn swim and held her head under the water.

Changing the wedding rings had been a fraught moment, but both had slipped off easily enough in the early morning cool. The hazard after that was to get back to her room and cut her hair the inches necessary to turn it into Madeleine's. But she had already worked out where the scissors had to go, and Madeleine—as she had seen initially from the photographs—had been content not to meddle with the natural ash-blond with which nature had endowed them both. In case it should be observed that Monica's hair was a little shorter in death than it had been in life, she had left the clippings where they fell—on and around Monica's dressing table—as evidence of a last pathetic attempt by the dead woman to look more like her sister.

As for the language . . . Monica had read Modern Languages at Oxford, and despite living so long in France, Madeleine was lazy and had spoken English to her husband and as many other people as possi-

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ble. Monica had listened to her with her staff and quickly realized that her own knowledge of French still outran her sister's. But she had played it down, limping, stumbling, asking people to speak more slowly, apologising to Madeleine for having got so rusty. And even their own mother had been unable to tell their voices apart.

She'd been practising Madeleine's signature for as long as she'd been acting out her depression, and their handwriting had always been the same. And Madeleine had actually mentioned her intention of finding a local dentist now that her London wonderman was talking of retiring . . .

So that was it, really, apart from Roland. And Roland, now out of sight and so soon to be out of mind, had shown her that her crime had paid.

Getting slowly to her feet, Monica followed him into the house and locked herself into her beautiful new bedroom. Even before cutting her hair after Madeleine's last swim she had taken the little bottle from Monica's handbag and hidden it at the back of one of Madeleine's drawers. Now she took it out and held it in her hand, reading the label: *Digoxin tablets: one to be taken once a day. It is dangerous to exceed the stated dose.*

She hadn't expected Roland to recognize her, but she had brought the pills with her just in case—the reserve bottle he kept at the back of the medicine chest. If he had been suspicious she would have put a lethal dose into the glass of scotch he always took up to bed with him and which Madeleine always put into his hand as they said good night, and no one would have known whether his unhappiness at the loss of his wife had made him suicidal or merely careless. . . .

Reluctantly, Monica threw the pills and the label down her sister's private lavatory and flushed them away. She would have relished killing Roland, punishing him for the years of sadistic belittlement, but that would have been to tempt the fate she had at last bent so successfully to her will.

And the second-best thing about a perfect murder was that it cut out the need to commit any more. ●

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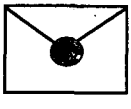

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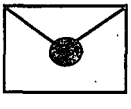

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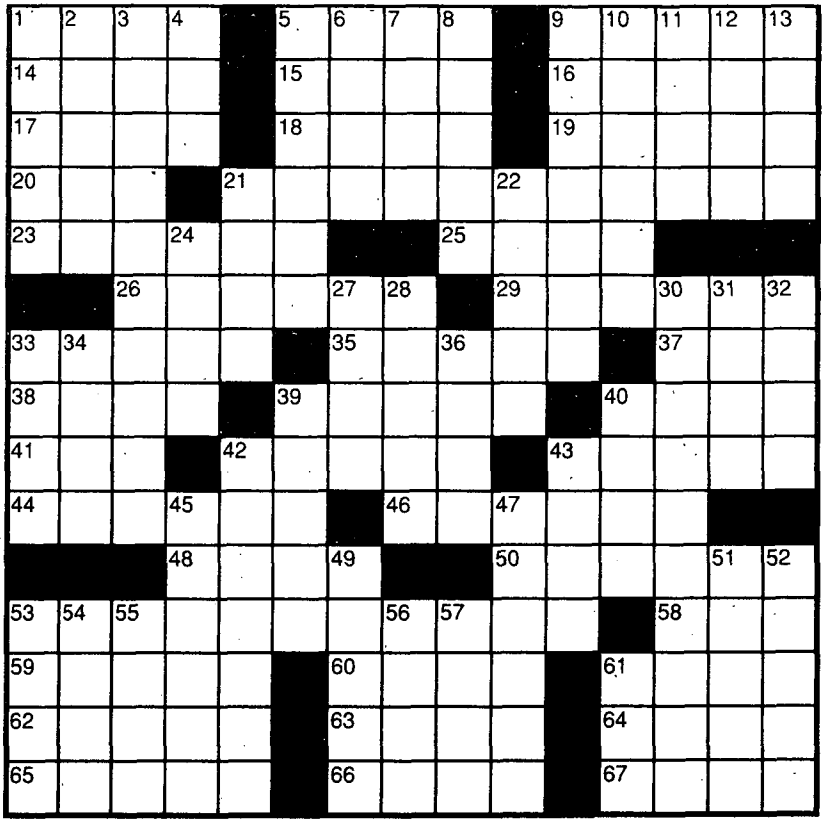
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Gore Galore

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 237

ACROSS

1. They come out
5. *A ___ in the Dark*, Lawrence Block
9. Instruments of torture
14. That one, *Lat.*
15. Enclosure
16. Reginald Hill's "Mrs. Pascoe"
17. Bright light
18. Operatic solo
19. Plant leaf

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20. Latin I verb
21. Peter Lovesey's dogs?
23. *The* _____ *of the Third Mile,* Colin Dexter
25. Rise high
26. Rental agreements
29. Threefold
33. Official in Falco's Roma
35. Kind of road
37. Actor Ayres
38. Mystery writer S.S. Van ____
39. Watercourse
40. Lost
41. Wedding announcement word
42. Computer accessory
43. Where coins go
44. Attack
46. Took five
48. Le Sage's *Gil* ____
50. Contact and bifocal
53. P.M. Carlson's river?
58. Mrs. Murphy or Tee Tucker
59. *The Cloister and the Hearth* author
60. Rave's partner
61. Learning
62. Pains
63. Teen's bane
64. One of the five Greats
65. Strong box
66. Unwelcome plant
67. Follows young or old

DOWN

1. Bulgarian money
2. Ingredient in lacquer
3. Cynthia Harrod-Eagles's genealogy?
4. Chinese leader Sun Yat-___
5. _____ of Justice
6. Poi
7. Exchange commission
8. Rosary
9. Return to ship
10. Charm
11. Family group in Glasgow
12. Notorious Captain
13. Understands
21. Livid
22. _____ *Paradise,* Martha Grimes
24. Editor's word
27. Old-fashioned oath
28. More sensible
30. Dick Francis's interest?
31. Imparted
32. Those who lamb
33. ____ Buchanan, creator of Britt Montero
34. *The Old School* ____, Kate Morgan
36. Domesticate
39. Sodas
40. Narrow valley
42. Most calm
43. From ____ to stern
45. Residences
47. Scheduled
49. Sometimes the last
51. Weird
52. Direct
53. Bric-a-____
54. Mr. Walesa
55. Missouri river dam
56. Goes with human or rat
57. Nine, *pref.*
61. ___ *Misérables*

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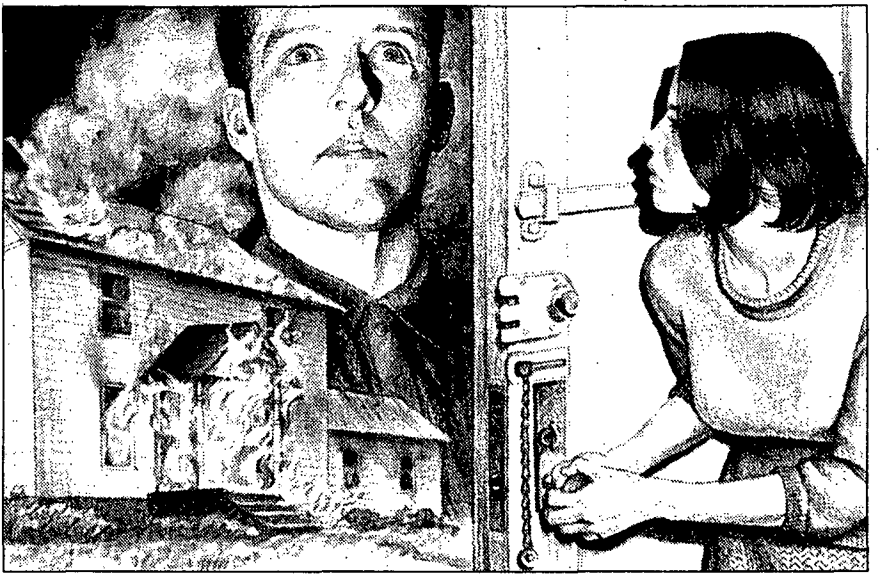

Art by Laurie Harden

HOMECOMING

by Gerald Pearce

An hour ago David North had been on a plane. Then at a funeral—had buried the old man just before the rain began. Now he was in the rented Tercel again.

He rounded the last corner. Through the wet windshield the old MacDonald house looked even more rundown, its empty garage doorless and disconsolate. Beyond it the double empty lot was still overgrown, bedraggled. Then, at the end of the block, where the blight hadn't quite reached, his grandfather's house.

Now, apparently, his house. John Lowndes, the lawyer who'd called, had said the grandson was the sole beneficiary of the old man's will. He had grinned and wondered why. The voice on the phone, sounding offended, had said, "You are the sole surviving family member," as though that explained anything. It only emphasized that Professor Emeritus Davis McLaren had been a chilly old relic with hardly any friends—whatever value he'd given the word.

"When did it happen?"

"Wednesday night. First big rain of the season getting started," the elderly lawyer had explained. "He complained of a headache and left his chess club early. I took him home. Then we found he'd left his zipper-

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notebook at the club. Tom Hastings tried to take it to him—he's another retired prof. Lights on in the house but no answer, front door locked but not the back. So he went in and . . . found him."

Simple, really. A fragile old man had fallen down his basement stairs and hit his head, not been found for an hour, and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

The few other details David North learned after the brief graveside service. In the ambulance, the old man had recovered consciousness long enough to mutter a few words but only one—"lockbox"—was intelligible.

Also cryptic, annoying.

"I thought he might have meant his safe-deposit box," the lawyer told him, "so I checked at his bank. Old legal papers, insurance policies, birth certificates, things like that. Nothing you could imagine being on his mind in the ambulance. So of course we checked the house. No lockbox. Didn't tear the house apart, we thought that perhaps when you got here . . ." And David had nodded like a dutiful grandson. He'd play their game, maintain the facade, as though he gave a damn. . . .

It stopped raining as he turned into the short wet driveway, taking the Tercel to within a foot of the garage door. The garage was a wooden building set back from the sidewalk, painted green with a white trim some twenty years ago. The double doors sagged in the middle, held shut by the same padlock he remembered from longer ago than that.

David North was thirty-one, dark, lean, compact.

He got out of the car. Cold air. He smelled wet grass, wet leaves. Moisture hung in the air as thick as smoke and almost as visible.

He closed the car door. A yard away three wooden steps went up to a tiny porch and the house's side entrance. The door looked secure as a bank vault.

Between the garage and the rear corner of the house he could see part of the backyard. Rain still dropped audibly from twig to branch before hitting the ground under the cherry and walnut trees. All around, the sound of water falling from shrubs and trees, from roofs and eaves, blended into the wet pervasive rustle of winter, a half-heard spiderweb of sound that trapped the world in a net of deprivation.

He had no key for the side door but he had two for the front door. He felt in his pocket for them as he walked toward the sidewalk, passing uncurtained windows with yellowed blinds pulled down behind them

Born in England and raised in the Middle East, Gerald Pearce has lived in the U.S. since 1948. He worked as a television writer early in his career, creating more than 250 half-hour documentaries and travelogues, and later served as a staff writer for Walt Disney's *Wonderful World of Color*. These days Mr. Pearce is almost exclusively a fiction writer, who publishes in magazines such as *Asimov's Science Fiction* and *EQMM*.

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and dust visible on the frames behind the glass. The place looked unlived-in. Not just for three days. Months.

In front of the house a lamentable elm grew out of the parking strip. Across the street the houses looked better cared-for than his grandfather's but just as lifeless. The heavy shrubbery had been cut back around the second house down the street, the old Tarquin house, and the roof trim and window frames were freshly painted; so there had been changes, though not enough to disguise a middle-class neighborhood past its prime on a gray wet November day in Eugene, Oregon. Which he'd last seen more than five years ago.

He turned and looked across the weary lawn at his grandfather's house.

Yard untended. Blinds drawn. The green scalloping over the porch beginning to peel. Same old porch furniture. Rust spots showing through the white paint on the glider were visible even from the sidewalk. The cane chair's legs were splayed and fraying.

In the elm, the sporadic slap of water sliding off a high leaf onto a lower one was suddenly lost in the rattle of fresh rain. He turned up the collar of his quilted nylon jacket.

To go away is to die a little. To come back is to know what it's like to be a ghost. Whoever'd said that was wrong. He didn't feel like a ghost. He didn't feel anything. Just irritated? *What the hell was he doing here anyway?* Repaying a debt, he supposed. Not even much of one.

He started up the cracked concrete walk dividing the lawn. *Abandon hope all you who enter here* wasn't actually incised over the front door, but, for all that the old man had run it like a sensory-deprivation tank, the house was just a house. Quite grand in its day, now going to hell in a hearse because the old man hadn't been able to take care of it. Nothing intimidating about the house.

Nor about the old man, actually. All he'd ever been was distant. Apparently shy and reserved from birth, he had astonished faculty colleagues at the university by marrying, at thirty-six, a woman only slightly younger and fathering a daughter, outliving the wife by decades, the daughter too: the daughter having married, it was said, too young and unsuitably, returning to the sanctuary of her father's house with a month-old baby, only to die in a hit-and-run accident five years later; the distant grandfather withdrawing more deeply into himself but undertaking, with chilly resolution, the single-handed upbringing and education of a bewildered little boy. Neither kind nor cruel, not intuitive but thoughtful, evidently without a single memory of what it was like to be a child, Davis McLaren had done this with no evident motive beyond the conviction that it was his duty.

And now he was dead, at eighty-seven. Had the old buzzard expected to be mourned out of *duty?*

The little boy of five hadn't taken long to realize that you had to be more like Grandfather if you wanted him to like you. And then, gradually, after coming to think he was getting a lot like him, realizing that if

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you still wanted Grandfather to like you, then you really hadn't managed to become much like him at all. Maybe men weren't supposed to like people the way his dead mother used to, with laughter and hugs and warmth. Grandfather had few friends, who seldom visited. His calm, measured enthusiasms were reserved for music and chess. His collection of classical recordings, slanted heavily toward the most intellectually demanding works—he had no time for the facile emotionalism of Mozart, the Beethoven of the symphonies and concertos—would have excited envy in any classical radio station, and his playback equipment was superb. Otherwise he lived frugally, playing chess by mail against opponents on three continents, and relaxing solving chess problems in books and newspapers.

So young David learned to be calm, focused. And not to lose his temper. Grandfather said it prevented thought, betrayed immaturity. Grandfather never lost his temper. Or cried. He said emotions were untrustworthy. Ignorable. Deniable. Devoted to the solace of the intellect, he had taught David to play chess after his mother died, to take his mind off his loss. . . .

He crossed the porch. One key slid back the dead bolt, the other opened the latch. The heavy door swung into dim familiarity. He stepped inside, closed the door, reached for the switch just beyond the door frame.

Reluctant wan yellow light came on in a bowl fixture in the ceiling.

The front room ran the width of the house. Beyond a low, wide arch was the dining room. A staircase curved down out of darkness, narrow and uncarpeted. Booklined, worn, sparsely and indifferently furnished, the room was the monotony of browns and grays he had known most of his life. The stereo equipment in the front corner, with speakers high on a wall, was an abrupt intrusion. On the desk under the corner window, on the wide, low coffee table in front of the sagging arm chair—on every available flat surface—chess games in progress waited for someone to make the next move.

His breath silvered the air. Indoors was as cold as out.

A tarnished brass faceplate set into the wall by the stairs marked the control unit governing the gas furnace in the basement. All the little lights were off. He punched the button under one of them. Nothing happened. He tried another. Same result. The remote wasn't working. He'd have to visit the basement and turn the furnace on manually.

Was that why the old man was heading for the basement that night . . . ?

He went through the dining room, turning on more lights. All the woodwork—floor, dining table and chairs, noble old sideboard—needed polishing. Blinds hid the windows. A door took him to the back of the house.

Old-fashioned kitchen on his left. Opposite it, the downstairs bedroom. Then the utility porch, with the back door that had been open to admit Tom what's-his-name, Hastings. Of course, someone else *could*

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have come in that way to make sure the old man had his accident, or maybe *left* by the back door. He or she or they could always have come in by the front door. Sure. Or dropped down the chimney. Inventing comic-book scenarios was dumb.

Just before the utility porch, bare concrete steps led downward. He took them. They angled left halfway down, then he was on the basement floor. Weak gray light filtered through grimy ground-level windows.

He reached up for the string that tripped the switch that lit the naked sixty-watt ceiling light.

Despite the cold, the deep jutting shadows, the basement was more welcoming than the upstairs had been. Heavy wooden shelving held cardboard packing boxes, contents listed on labels. Less dust than he remembered. Old leather suitcases. A steamer trunk. The old daybed in the corner hadn't been moved since he'd first come to live here. Under the furnace, the pilot light made a faint glow. Ancient wires from a conduit snaked to the switch box but didn't quite make it, hanging loosely near their contacts.

He turned the furnace on high. It came alight with a *whoosh*, settled into a quiet roar. He began to feel a spreading warmth, took a deep breath.

The basement was the one place where the old man's deprivation scheme had sometimes broken down. It had been here, shortly before his fifteenth birthday, that he had first got Jan Tarquin's panties down. She lived across the street.

He had never seen a real live naked girl before, much less fondled one, and had chosen her to advance his education because she was new to Eugene and hadn't many friends and was quite appealing. He'd caught her watching him a few times, her face thoughtful, speculative. He suspected her of harboring improbably romantic yearnings, or perhaps a sexual curiosity as lively as his own. A classmate, she was slender and dark-haired and almost as tall as he was, with thick arching eyebrows and big eyes and; undressed, a sleek fragile-seeming young body that wasn't at all fragile and that evoked astonished delight and dispassionate objective study. He wanted to learn fast.

Perhaps she had too, because she had soon signaled her willingness to return to the basement with him, and their increasingly rewarding gropings and grapplings had continued until summer vacation had taken her to visit relatives in Arizona. When she returned to start the new school year he was already involved with another girl, Jan Tarquin's opposite, a practiced voluptuary of sixteen who found his seriousness amusing but no bar to carnal enjoyment. He had, for a while, been strongly attracted to her body, and intrigued by the depths underlying her cheerful sexuality until forced to conclude that there weren't any. By then she was becoming involved with someone else, and he and Jan had become little more than distant acquaintances.

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He went back upstairs.

The rest of the house was simply the place where he had grown up through untold hours of boredom. From grade school onward, his drive for academic success had goaded him, before every scheduled exam, to commit the contents of his fanatically maintained notebooks, plus a lot of textbook pages, to memory. Better be safe than sorry. Not knowing an answer meant more than embarrassment, it meant betraying his essential identity and left him quivering and defenseless. He'd hardly ever let it happen.

. . . Well, once more unto the breach, one more bout of deep boredom while he looked for that possibly imaginary lockbox, cleared the house of junk, and got everything ready for sale or donation as soon as the house and its contents were declared legally his.

He checked the service porch. The back door was bolted and locked with an old-fashioned skeleton key: no automatic spring latch here. Windows shut, bolted. The downstairs bedroom, which the old man had moved into when climbing stairs got difficult, was spare as a cell and as secure. The walk-in closet had clothes on hangers and storage boxes neatly crammed onto upper shelves. More storage boxes were visible under the bed, behind the nearly floor-length drape of the bedspread. In the adjacent bathroom, with its clawfooted tub, the window had been painted shut.

He returned to the front room—in time to catch movement just outside the front window, a flicker of deeper darkness visible at the edge of the blind.

He turned sharply to the front door and jerked it open.

A startled young man stood a foot away. He was tall and thin and wore a lumberjack's hat with the earflaps down, a scuffed leather jacket, and threadbare jeans. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of the jacket. His eyes were blue and his face was long and pale. His mouth hung open.

Dave North snapped, "Yes?" and became aware of a girl in a hooded rain slicker off to his left near the window.

The young man closed his mouth and said in a thready voice, "Uh . . . who the hell are you?"

"I belong here. You don't. What do you want?"

"I w-wanna know who you are 'n' what you're doing here."

"None of your business and none of your business," Dave said. "Get lost."

"Guess we need the cops." The young lip curled. Truculence had been quickly achieved.

"Call them."

The girl's voice said, through a congested nose, "Bet he was lookin' for that lockbox."

"Yeah." The tall, thin guy took his hands out of his pockets. He had big hands. "Start talkin', bud."

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"Sure." Dave stepped out onto the porch and pulled the door shut Without warning he hit the young guy in the chest, hard and fast, with the heel of his right hand, sending him reeling backwards. He reached the steps and kept going and hit the wet concrete pathway flat on his back.

The girl squealed, "Virg!" She ran down the steps and knelt beside him while a squad car glided to the curb under the elm with a brief growl from its siren. Virg struggled to sit up, grabbing his ankle and making noises like a hurt kid.

Two cops, in no hurry at all, got out of the squad car and crossed the parking strip. One was young, the other not so young. Both wore the obligatory cop look of stone indifference. The young one said, "Well, look who's here: Virg and Kathy," and stayed with them.

The other came up onto the porch. The nametag on his chest said Kraniak.

Somewhere along the line the rain had stopped again.

Dave said, "Did you guys just happen along by accident?"

"The lady in sixteen-fourteen called in," Kraniak said. "Mrs. Ford. She said a couple of prowlers were acting suspicious around the old prof's house. Didn't say anything about you, though. Can I see some ID?"

"We buried the 'old prof' this morning." Dave showed his driver's license. "I'm his grandson. I'll be staying here a few days, doing whatever needs doing—I'm not sure of the legalities yet."

Kraniak pointed to the Tercel. "Yours?"

"A rental."

"Why'd you hit the kid?"

"He was talking tough. When he took his hands out of his pockets I thought he was getting physical."

"Yeah," Kraniak said meaninglessly, and went down the porch steps. Dave followed him.

Virg was on his feet now, favoring the left, his mouth twisted with pain, leaning on the girl. She had an uninteresting face and a lot of stringy hair poking out from under the hood of the slicker. She looked mad.

"That man hit my brother!" She pointed dramatically to Dave. "For no reason! Just up and hit him and threw him off the porch—"

"We saw, so calm down. Mr. North, meet Virg and Kathy Howard." Kraniak pointed to the MacDonald house. "They live down at the end of the block."

"Virg is seventeen and a high-school dropout." The younger officer's nametag said Haddad. "His sister's fifteen and got a head cold so she stayed home from school. So she could go out and play in the nice sunny weather."

Virg waved a free hand at Dave. "We saw this guy drive up in a rented car and go into the old guy's place to rip it off."

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"Yeah," Kathy said, pausing to blow her nose on a damp tissue. "Prob'ly going after that lockbox."

"What lockbox?" Kraniak said.

"The one the paper talked about," the girl said impatiently.

Both officers looked at Dave.

"I never saw the paper," Dave said. "I just flew in from San Diego. My grandfather's lawyer told me the old man tried to speak in the ambulance. The only word anyone could get was 'lockbox.' Then he died."

"He's dyin', it's the last thing on his mind!" Virg insisted. "That makes it important."

"Who to?" Kraniak said. "Meet Mr. North, the old professor's grandson. He's got legitimate business in that house and you don't. Get it through your heads, you guys. You can't afford to get one inch out of line."

"But it's okay for him to attack me?" Virg protested. "We were just worried about the old man's property."

"File a complaint," Kraniak said. "Then he'll file a cross complaint—you don't need the grief. No more dumb junk, huh? Next time we take you in. Want a ride home, Virg?"

"Not in no cop car," Virg said.

His sister fidgeted under his arm.

"Well, I ain't gonna *carry* you!"

Virg took his arm off Kathy's shoulder, stood tall. His grin was sly and triumphant.

"Fine thing. A guy gets beat up on and the cops give the other guy a medal. Let's go home, kid."

They started for home, Virg barely favoring his left foot.

The squad car disappeared. Dave turned back to the house. Work to be done in there. First he'd better check around outside, see if the Howard kids had left any surprises.

Cramming his hands into the pockets of his nylon jacket, he went to the end of the block, turned right, walked along the side of the house. The windows were high, visibly latched. The ground-level windows into the basement were as dirty outside as in. He tried opening them. They were painted shut with old paint. There were no footprints in the muddy uncared-for flowerbeds between the sidewalk and the house.

From the corner of the house, he surveyed the bedraggled backyard with its cherry and walnut trees. A narrow cement path took him to the back porch. From inside, the door had seemed secure. From outside it repelled, rejected. With its blind pulled down, the grimy window was as private as death and no more communicative.

He left the porch for the next corner. The Tercel gleamed wetly. The little peak-roofed porch sheltering the side entrance offered a squat, ironic challenge. He climbed the steps, grasped the darkly corroded doorknob. The latch withdrew. The door wouldn't budge.

He was halfway back to the sidewalk when he saw the low opening to

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the crawl space under the house. It was closed off by a wire-mesh screen in a heavy wooden frame. The ground in front of it was criss-crossed by heavy fresh footprints the weather hadn't had time to obliterate.

Virg Howard's?

Maybe he'd thought the crawl space would let him into the house where the old man had hidden the lockbox. But the screen proved immovable, the wood swollen shut, the paint flaking. No one had gotten under the house this way for years.

Maybe he should go ask the lady in the house across the street exactly what she'd seen. Mrs. Ford, Kraniak had said, in 1614.

It felt weird, approaching 1614, which had been the Tarquin house sixteen years ago. He had always done so cautiously, tension hidden behind a casual, respectful facade. What Jan's folks didn't know was important, and it was important to keep them not knowing it.

The house looked younger now. The neat front yard suggested a professional gardener. The sagging old front porch had been replaced by a trim new one with a composition roof and a row of big earthenware flowerpots decorating a low brick wall.

The doorway was a Gothic arch, the door iron-bound wood with a heavy brass knocker. He used it twice, lightly. In a few seconds the door swung inward the length of the security chain. Half revealed in the narrow opening was a woman with short dark hair and a neatly chiseled face who wore a bulky oatmeal-colored sweater and a full, mid-calf tweed skirt.

He said, "Mrs. Ford?" and felt suddenly—incomprehensibly—ill-at-ease.

"Yes?" Calm but cautious. A faint line appeared between her eyebrows. Her voice was suddenly tentative. "Dave? . . . David North?"

His mouth had fallen open. He closed it hurriedly. "Dave North, plain as day."

The security chain rattled. The woman in the doorway pushed something into the pocket of her skirt and opened the door a bit wider.

"Hi. Remember me? Jan Ford, used to be Tarquin. What a nice surprise!"

"My God," Dave said. "The cops said Mrs. Ford and I never . . . The place looks so new and . . ." *Damn.* He never floundered. He took a deep smiling breath, acknowledging the depth of his surprise. "I'd heard you moved East."

"Went to Princeton, married a master's candidate, American lit. He taught at NYCC for a while. New York got pretty scary so he applied to the University of Oregon. About the time he was accepted, my dad retired and he and Mom moved to Arizona permanently, so they gave us the house. Look, I'm declaring a coffee break. Won't you join me?"

"Thank you."

She closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath before opening the

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door the rest of the way. He stepped into warm, dry air. The little entrance hall was hardly changed, with a hat-and-coat rack with a mirror set into it and a little shelf for gloves and things under the mirror. A small red bike was propped up on its kickstand.

"You've got a kid," he said. Which was dumb. Jan was almost his age. Married for years. Of course she had a kid.

"Barbara, age seven, in the third grade." Jan Ford closed the front door. "How about you?"

"Still single."

"Avoiding entangling alliances." He saw a brief smile. She went through the arch into the kitchen, switching on an overhead light. He followed, remembering the kitchen as dark and cozy, but found himself in a room as sunny and light as was possible on a cold gray day in November. The walls were a yellow so soft it was almost white.

Jan put a filter into the top of a hand-thrown pottery coffee maker. "I'm sorry about your granddad, Dave." She switched on an electric kettle. "Why don't you take off that wet coat and hang it in the hall?"

He did so. When he got back she was spooning dark pungent coffee into the filter. Her hair was short, soft around her face. Little gold-mounted cat's-eye studs winked from her ears. When she rolled the coffee bag closed and put it in the refrigerator, the full tweed skirt swayed as she walked. She looked totally gorgeous. Always graceful, she had a new calm stillness. New to him anyway. She had filled out a little, but maybe only in her face. It would be fun to talk this Jan out of these clothes and find out. . . . Of course, a kid and a husband complicated things.

He said, "My plane was late. I barely got to the funeral in time."

"I wanted to go," Jan said. "I mean, we lived just across the street, and I'd known him since high school, though I don't suppose we even said hello more than twice a year." She set out cups and saucers while he took a seat in the breakfast nook. "But I couldn't. Otherwise we'd have met earlier. I'd have recognized you at once. You've hardly changed."

"You have. You're not wearing jeans." He grinned. "You're in control. You've lost that air of adventure."

"Adventure," she said dismissively. "Who needs it? What are you doing these days?"

"I took a master's in library science. I'm assistant librarian at John Muir Junior College in San Diego."

"That's no surprise. Books don't talk back."

Again the briefest smile. The kettle had been growling and now began to bubble. She switched it off, poured water onto the coffee in the filter section. "I saw your little car in the driveway but I'd no idea whose it was. I thought maybe John Lowndes, your granddad's lawyer, or maybe a service man of some sort. And then those two showed up, the neighborhood's resident semi-delinquents. I didn't want to tackle them myself. So I called the police."

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"I'm very glad you did. What had they been doing?"

"Prowling, looking furtive, looking into windows, trying to get into the crawl space under the house."

"They told the cops they thought someone had broken in."

"Then they should've called the cops themselves. I'm afraid they haven't got too much going for them. Virg does what he can, but there's not much work for unskilled labor around here except in summer, when the cannery's open. He was a suspect in a couple of robberies a few months back but nothing was ever proved."

"How long have they been neighbors?"

"They arrived with their mother from God knows where and rented the MacDonald house about eighteen months ago. Old Mac died and Mrs. Mac's in a home but apparently quite competent. She has an agent rent the place for her and handle the upkeep. Either she's tight with the upkeep money or he's a bandit. I guess the rent's pretty low; Rosie Howard can't make much. She's a freelance domestic, scrubbing floors and bathrooms and doing vacuuming and laundry for university faculty members. Who say she's painfully honest. She works awfully hard for those kids."

"Did my grandfather ever mention a lockbox to you?"

"Goodness, no. I was hardly a friend. But I read that lockbox story in the paper. His mind could've been a thousand miles and seventy years away when he spoke of it. A fall, severe head trauma . . . and he was eighty-seven."

He nodded. The coffee had filtered through by now. Jan took the top section off and set it down in the sink over the drain, put the regular lid on the pot, and brought it to the dinette table.

"Do you take cream and sugar these days?"

"No indeed. Same old me."

"A tot of brandy to keep out the Oregon chill?"

He smiled evenly. "Nice idea!" But his mind pounced. A friendly gesture to someone from a warmer climate—or a confession? Did being a faculty wife lead to boredom and boozing? Maybe being a faculty wife explained those little smiling digs about no entangling alliances and books not talking back. A readiness with those might serve to remind amorous undergraduates that a faculty wife was utterly unavailable; to anyone else they were simply irritating. And just how unavailable *was* she?

She reached into a tall cupboard and produced a small flat bottle, then sat across from him, filling two coffee cups. One she set in front of him with the brandy bottle. He spiked his cup, slid the bottle back. She recapped it. Okay: One point to her.

"I'd almost fogotten how cold it gets up here." He inhaled the fragrance rising with the steam from his cup. "The old house was like a meat locker. But the weird thing was how little anything'd changed, as though I'd been away for the weekend, not five years. No feeling of homecoming, or of much else either, until I went down into the base-

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ment to light the furnace. Just a cold place of angles and shadows—but a lot friendlier than anywhere upstairs."

Bingo.

Her cup hit the rim of the saucer. For a long moment she concentrated on not spilling coffee, then raised the cup to chin level, balancing it with the fingertips of the other hand. Wide dark eyes looked at him without changing expression. *Two points to me. At least. Don't play games with me, kid.*

The outer corners of her eyes lifted fractionally.

"We accomplished a few nice breaks in routine down there. I'm flattered you remember them."

"Oh, sure. You were my first."

"You were mine, too." She tried her coffee. Still too hot. "My hormones had been doing weird things to me for a couple of years, and I was impossibly romantic. You made quite an impression on me. You were so fiercely *alone*. Took me awhile to realize you were simply alienated. Still are, aren't you?"

"I'll have to ask a shrink." But feint-and-parry wasn't the way to get this Jan out of these clothes. Abruptly he shifted gears, smiled and said mildly, "Is there something in the rules that says we have to snipe at each other? We were friends once."

"Goodness! Is that Dave North asking for quarter?"

"I didn't think it was, but okay."

He tried his coffee now. He liked it hot. It reached his stomach with an explosion of benevolent warmth. He'd have to be careful. He didn't want to lose his edge. She made a small nod, as though graciously accepting his surrender though unconvinced it was real. He went on, in the same easy tone, "I suppose I ought to talk to Virg and Kathy's mom sometime today."

Not that he had anything to say to her—he'd just said that as a conversational filler. But it might not be a bad idea. Dotting the last i and crossing the final t had always meant the security of completion. The unturned stone could always hide the guffaw of derision, the unanswerable question, the fatal booby trap.

Jan asked, "You'll be staying on at the house?"

"For a day or two. I inherit the whole thing but I guess I can only do so much until the formalities are completed. Then I'll turn it over to Mr. Lowndes for sale. There's nothing for me up here."

For a moment she looked relieved. Then she put her cup down. Too deliberately. Minutes ago he had admired her poised calm but now he began to feel that there was something too controlled about it, almost rigid, and it had been there from the moment she had opened the front door. She was afraid. But what of?

He had to calm that fear if he was ever going to get her out of these clothes. Maybe reminding her of their basement frolics of sixteen years ago had been mistimed. Well, all the more challenge.

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He grinned and said, "So you'll have me for a neighbor for a few days, but don't worry, I'm quite tame."

He reached across the table and touched her hand. He wasn't ready for what happened.

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. She snatched her hand away with a force that sent her coffee cup flying, kicking over her chair and stumbling backwards over it into the kitchen. Her knees sagged and she fumbled in her skirt pocket while her throat strained on a hardly human noise. Her hand came out of her pocket and swept up toward him, holding a small canister. The noise from her throat cut off abruptly but her mouth stayed open. She stood half-crouched, graceless and uncoordinated, like a terrified child.

Had she invited him in after deciding he was—probably—safe as long as she kept insurance in her pocket? Mace? Pepper spray?

Did she ever open the door without it in her hand?

He felt utterly at a loss, which made him feel stupid and vulnerable.

The coffee cup had shattered somewhere. Half its contents were spreading across the table, beginning to drip into his lap. Reflexively he squirmed.

"Don't move!" High, thin, a voice like a wind through wire. Her face was the color of bleached bone, her eyes dark caves of nightmare.

He said in an uncomprehending whisper, "What . . ." and then forgot what he'd been going to say. For a long time neither moved or said anything.

And then at last her lips began to quiver. A little at a time she even got her mouth closed. Fear began draining out of her eyes, leaving them bereft.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was bodiless, hopeless. "I'm so sorry." She lowered her can of safety.

He said cautiously, "Maybe you could use a little jolt of brandy yourself. . . ."

But she was already talking before he got the words out.

". . . I thought it was . . . getting better. I mean, I thought I'd soon be able to . . . shake hands, things like that, with a little warning, time to get ready. Some people are afraid of heights. Open spaces. With me it's . . . touching. Being touched. By anyone."

He thought automatically, *Since when?* and then realized with a feeling of deflation that her clothes would have to stay on after all.

She went on in the same hopeless voice, "Except Barbara. No one else. Not even Jeff. Poor Jeff. I'm a terrible, hopeless, hopeless wife. Because I got *raped*. Four guys broke in and *raped* me on my kitchen floor and all I could think of was Barbara, watching cartoons on TV next-door with the little neighbor girl, all I could think of was, God, sweetheart, don't come home, don't, stay away—!"

When she stopped, he said woodenly, "Here? In Eugene?"

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Her head shook, hardly more than a tremor. The stiff half-crouch began to ease.

"New York. Now even Jeff stays away most of the time, in a little apartment close to the campus. Our excuse is his work. Maybe only Barbara believes that."

She looked down at the canister in her hand, with a grimace of revulsion threw it into the sink. Then stood looking at it, and after a while, looking embarrassed, scooped it back into her pocket.

Dave heard himself say, "Hang onto that. All I can promise is that around me you'll never need it."

The words echoed weirdly in his head. He hoped they were the right ones. He was rather surprised to find that he meant them.

She was standing almost straight now. She tried to smile. Her lips jerked and flopped like spastic butterflies. She put hands over her mouth and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"You needn't be." Was *that* the right thing to say? He was awkward at giving sympathy. He could fake real feeling better with the help of a clasped hand, a gentle hug. He made his face relax. "Is it okay if I move now?"

"Oh yes. Please. Do."

"You'll have to tell me what next. Do you want me to go, and will you be all right?"

". . . This is awful . . . but yes, would you? I'll be fine. Is there a phone over there?"

"There is."

"I'll call you. Or you call me. Please."

Outside, through the thickness of the door, he heard Jan slide the security chain into place.

It had rained again and the fog had closed in. An ordinary wet day looked like it could turn dramatic. The wet patch of spilled coffee on his jeans leg was cold and clammy.

He crossed the street at a diagonal. The elm tree sounded its irregular rattle. The untended lawn was a green swamp and the house was unwelcoming. The shaded windows had the flat shine of dead eyes.

He crossed the porch and let himself into pleasant warmth. He'd also left the overhead light on. Heat and light made the front room less forbidding, but it was still a room from another era presided over in Professor McLaren's absence by stern, immobile chessmen, on duty till the old guy returned to make the next move in one of his games-by-mail.

Dave thought suddenly, *How do I tell the chessmen that their vigil is over, that all they're doing is collecting dust?*

Surprised, he sneered inwardly. Sentimentalizing inanimate objects wasn't his style. Getting mawkish over his grandfather's chess pieces, for God's sake! He must have been jarred off course by what had happened to Jan in New York, and by her response to the casual touch of his hand. Which was absurd. Jan hadn't been important to him since

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he was fifteen. Her problems were her own, but obviously involved a lot of pain. He didn't know much about pain. He'd spent most of his life avoiding it.

What he had to endure now was boredom.

The desk in the corner didn't take long. He had found a bunch of keys on a plain ring—no spare front-door key among them—in the shallow belly-drawer, along with a couple of ballpoint pens, a pencil, a box of rubber bands, and a pocket pencil sharpener he recognized as his own from grade school. The topmost of the tier of drawers was devoted to neat bundles of chess correspondence. The two drawers below it were empty except for dust.

He looked up the old man's lawyer's number and called him on the phone.

"Law office, John Lowndes."

"Hi, Mr. Lowndes. David North here, calling from my grandfather's house."

"Oh yes, David, good, I'm glad you called." Amazing how the brisk professional telephone voice could drop into that of the bereaved fellow-mourner so fast. "I tried to reach you earlier, just to make sure you had heat and light and the roof wasn't leaking."

"Everything's fine. I was over at a neighbor's I hadn't seen in years. Now I'm going through where my grandfather used to keep his household accounts. . . ."

"Got all that," the old lawyer said. "That's one of the things an executor does, makes sure the financial affairs are in order. One thing that wasn't in the desk, though, was his checkbook. Canceled checks and bank statements through to the middle of October, but no record of checks written since that time."

"It will probably turn up somewhere around the house. I'll look," Dave said.

"Bills were all paid around the end of the month. Gas, power, phone, the housekeeping team that came in every two weeks to keep the place civilized . . . Then of course he had a few small but nice investments, and a quite surprising amount in savings."

"Did you take the spare key from the keyring in the desk?"

"No. I have the set he had in his pocket. Incidentally, when you said you'd be staying there I cleaned out the refrigerator and left you half a dozen eggs and some bacon. I'm pretty sure there are some cans of soup in the cupboard over the sink."

"If I can find coffee, too, I'll be in pig heaven."

"I think I saw some. And tea. Your granddad was a bear for good tea—especially first-flush Darjeeling."

"I remember," Dave said, politely faking fond enthusiasm. How to get John Lowndes to shut up? Of course: abruptly. He said firmly, "Thank you, Mr. Lowndes."

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"Uh, sure, you're welcome," Lowndes said, as though taken aback. "Any more questions, you call."

Dave promised, and hung up.

He massaged his face roughly. It was stiff from the effort of keeping a smile in his voice. He was definitely on edge. It was this place, these people, his grandfather's friends—or "friends"—who expected him to be bereaved and to act in a certain way when all he wanted was a brisk settling of accounts. And it was Jan, too, of course, whose clothes he couldn't even try to get off, and the quiet narrow little streets and the cold and the low clouds and the enveloping fog and the unsettling sense of ghosts muttering invisibly of forgotten crimes and derelictions. . . .

Oh hell. Are there ghosts I have to exorcise around here, too? But he didn't believe in ghosts, even of the metaphorical kind. The problems of here and now were enough.

And, he suddenly realized, his most immediate problem was hunger.

The kitchen was so unchanged that he felt, uncomfortably, as though time had folded him back to his early youth. He heated a can of mushroom Soup-for-One and ate it with a few stale crackers and a hunk of Cheddar cheese he found wrapped in plastic at the back of the refrigerator, and drank coffee made in his grandfather's small glass percolator.

Then he washed the dishes and left them drying in the rack he'd found under the sink and went back to work.

First, the garage. He took the key ring from the desk and went outside in a lull in the rain. One of the keys unlocked the garage door—for obviously the first time in an age. The garage was empty.

Back indoors, he checked the closet at the foot of the stairs, once home to hats and coats, rain gear, umbrellas. No lockbox. No checkbook. Under the old man's bed in the downstairs bedroom were storage boxes containing spare sheets and blankets, packed tight. In the walk-in closet he first went through the pockets of all the clothes on hangers, then ransacked and repacked the drawers of shirts, socks, and underwear in the cramped built-in chest. The overhead shelf held only outdated philosophy textbooks. Nothing he was looking for.

He drew in a deep breath, blew it at the ceiling, let his mind wander for a few seconds. . . .

When it returned to the here-and-now he found he was looking at a shoetree in a corner of the walk-in, and wondered why. Then he realized that what he was interested in was neither the shoes nor the tree but what they were standing on.

Of course. No wonder they hadn't found it. They'd been looking for a real lockbox, metal, compact, probably fire resistant, with a good lock—maybe several. What the shoetree was standing on looked like flimsy gray-painted wood, a box about ten by fourteen inches and four inches deep. It had a small hasp and staple held to the wood with little Phillips-head screws. Locked, it might keep a mouse out. But there was no lock in sight.

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He moved the shoetree and picked up the box. It was light, not very sturdy. Whatever was in it was packed loosely. He set it down on the old man's bed—and stood looking at it, suddenly reluctant.

A box, contents unknown. Worth something, or nothing. Either way it might change his life beyond recognition.

The box was the stone unturned.

The page unread.

The old anxiety, unfelt for years, spread through his gut like a poisonous cold liquid.

Come on, for Christ's sake! The missing checkbook might be in there.

If it was, it would still be there after he'd checked the rest of the house.

So he undertook a meticulous examination of every room, every cupboard and shelf and possible hiding place in the rest of the house upstairs and down, even in the basement. He found neither the checkbook nor a more likely lockbox, and by the time he was done his resignation at the prospect of an extended bout of boredom had become a hammering impatience.

He marched into his grandfather's room and snapped on the overhead light.

The gray box sat where he had left it, smugly unaware of its vulnerability, callously indifferent to his.

He sat down beside it and before he could change his mind flipped up the hasp, threw open the lid.

In the silence of the bedroom, with the rush of his bloodstream in his ears, he went through the disorganized layers of mix-and-match envelopes he found in the box. They ranged from small personal letter-size to regular business-size to nine-by-twelve manila mailers. All were dull with age and wear. No checkbook.

There were a few photographs. One showed a slender middle-aged woman he didn't recognize. Another was of a smiling adolescent girl, another the same girl a little older holding the hand of a toddler wearing what looked like his first pair of jeans. The girl's face tugged at his memory. Presumably his mother. He couldn't remember ever seeing a picture of his mother. A few snapshots were of people he didn't know. There were a couple of newspaper clippings, a few concert programs from fifty years ago, his own high-school and college graduation programs. . . .

No heirloom gems, no documents locating a hidden bank account or real-estate holdings in downtown San Francisco. Just a few dusty out-of-character memories.

In the whispering silence, the front doorbell chimed.

Who in hell . . . ? He could ignore it, but . . .

He closed the box, stood up, turned off the light. It was only four o'clock but might as well have been midnight. He marched through the house, turning on lights. At the front door he turned on the porch light, unlatched the door, and pulled it open.

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Inches beyond it stood a woman in a raincoat and an incongruous beret. Her straggly gray hair looked self-barbered.

"You the grandson?" Her voice was unmusical. Her face was tired, square, bony except where the jawline sagged. Her eyes were flat brown pebbles, her mouth oddly childlike, stubborn.

"I'm Professor McLaren's grandson, yes," Dave said. "You must be Virg and Kathy's mom. Keep those two under control, lady. The cops can't wait to drop something heavy on them."

The childlike mouth tightened.

She said, "You beat up on my son, you fondle my girl's tits, you talking cop is a joke."

"Who dreamed that one up? I wouldn't have thought either of them had that much imagination. Did you know Professor McLaren?"

The question seemed to derail her aggressive momentum. She stared blankly into his face.

Then she said stolidly, "Sure. We were neighbors."

"He ever invite you or the kids into the house?"

"Naah. Not like we were friends or anything."

"You never worked for him?"

"What's it to you?"

"Look, Mrs. Howard. I asked because Virg and Kathy were very interested in this house this morning. As to whether you ever worked for him, normally we'd look at his checkbook register to see if he wrote you any checks. But the checkbook is missing. So we have to wait till we close out his bank account and get access to the last few weeks of canceled checks. No big deal, unless you want to make it one."

She shrugged. "Sure. Some housework one afternoon less'n two weeks ago."

"Didn't he have a housekeeping team come in every two weeks?"

"Yeah, but they weren't contracted to do the basement. He said he could use me for half a day to clean up and put the basement in order."

"Pay you by check?"

"Stuck in an envelope and taped to the front door."

"Why not give it to you in person?"

"Did the work on Wednesday." Her lip curled. She was explaining an eccentric to a half-wit. She pointed past him to the chess set on the coffee table.

"Wednesdays he went to his chess club. Some guy came and took him. I was still working. Enough questions. I gotta go fix dinner for my kids."

"How come they're so interested in the old man's lockbox?"

Under the beret and the chopped-off gray hair poking out around it, the tired square face congealed.

"It was on the news, and in the paper, the last thing the old guy talked about. People are interested. *You're* interested."

"Maybe the news got it wrong. His lawyer couldn't find any lockbox."

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"Get some tough cop to question that lawyer. I *know* there was a lockbox 'cause the old man told me."

The old man told me.

Unexpected news. Pause to regroup.

Dave said, "Ever tell anyone that?"

"Nobody never asked me. Why would they? The poor old guy fell down his basement steps and died."

"Maybe he had help."

"You think maybe my kids . . . ?" A stubby forefinger jabbed toward his face. "They were at the movies, mister. You remember that and you lay off my kids."

"If I see them hanging around this end of the block again I'm calling the police."

"Not . . . one . . . word . . . against my kids."

"Good evening, Mrs. Howard."

He backed away and closed the door.

He got the Fords' number from Information and called Jan. She answered the phone on the second ring, her voice reserved but willing to be friendly.

He said abruptly, "I thought I'd found that damn lockbox. Don't know why. Doesn't even have a lock."

It took her a moment to recognize his voice.

". . . Oh. Dave."

"And I talked with Mrs. Howard. She did an afternoon's work for my grandfather the week before he died. She says he told her he had a lockbox. Odd thing to tell a near-stranger."

Jan said, "Was there anything in the box you found?"

"A few mementoes, I guess. I'm surprised the old man kept them. Maybe he thought I'd want them someday, though I can't think why. Couple of snapshots I think are of my mother."

She said after a pause, "That's a worthwhile find."

"Am I interrupting dinner or anything?"

"Oh no. I was just about to mash the potatoes."

"Could I invite you and your little girl out to dinner tomorow? Somewhere with no dress code. I didn't bring a tie."

A longer pause this time. Then she said, "Um, I don't . . ." and gave up. The silence resumed.

He said slowly, "Jan, are you housebound?"

He heard her release her breath with a rush.

"Not . . . quite. I can go down to the little market . . . and down to the school-bus stop to see Barbara safely aboard or pick her up . . . but anywhere else is . . . difficult." Her voice became hurried, confidential. "It's not just housebound. I'm irrationally afraid of people—strangers. Inviting you in for coffee was a sort of spur-of-the-moment experiment. You know how that turned out."

He said awkwardly, "Inviting me in took guts. After all this time I'm

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at least a semi-stranger. It's none of my business but I'll ask anyway. Are you in therapy?"

"I was. That dimwit said I couldn't stand to be touched because it would remind me how much I'd enjoyed being raped. He was afraid I might try to get raped again so I could enjoy it again and at the same time be punished for enjoying it. I couldn't see it that way, so he said I was resisting him. I couldn't see it that way even under drugs and hypnosis, so I told him to find work he might be good at. I guess I'm between therapists."

"Don't give up on it." Was that good advice?—or just boilerplate encouragement? Could anything make therapy work? "Look, not to put pressure on you, but could we consider that dinner invitation open? In case you get experimental again."

"Okay. Thanks." She didn't sound hopeful.

"Where could that lockbox be?"

"Buried in the basement? Maybe the box you found has a false bottom."

"I'll check. Talk to you later."

The gray wooden box had no false bottom. The cement slabs of the basement floor were slightly uneven but looked untouched since the house was built.

He reset the gas furnace to low and went back upstairs and put on his jacket. Outside the fog had lifted and the evening had a vicious chill. He got into the Tercel and drove to a restaurant near the campus, had dinner, then found an open market where he bought a six-pack of good beer, half a pound of coffee, and a box of imported cookies.

Back on his grandfather's block he parked in front of the MacDonald house. The doorless garage now sheltered a Ford clunker. Dim light came through curtained ground-floor windows. He got out with his sack of goodies and navigated the soggy parking strip and the broken cement walk to the front porch. No porch light. He couldn't find a doorbell. He knocked. The front door rattled loosely under his knuckles.

He was ready to knock again when footsteps shuffled behind the door.

"Who is it?" A crabbed, uncongested female voice.

"David North from up the street, Mrs. Howard. Professor McLaren's grandson."

"Leave us alone!"

"Please, Mrs. Howard. I just need to ask one question."

Vague whisperings inside. He waited. The door was snatched open and he stared into the muzzle of a double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun. Held by Virg, of course, with a John Wayne air of careless confidence.

Dave's skin crawled. His mouth and throat were dry as Death Valley and his insides felt loose. For long moments the gun was all he could see. Then a girl giggled and he became aware of Kathy and Mrs.

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Howard a step behind Virg in the hallway, and that Virg was wearing jeans and a ratty sweater the color of machine oil and the cocky grin of someone who likes being top dog.

Dave said, trying for nonchalance but almost stammering, "What's the gun for?" *Christ, I sound like a frightened kid.* "I brought over a peace offering."

Kathy giggled again.

Virg said, "Ask your question and get lost."

"My question for you is, is that thing loaded?"

Virg's grin widened. "Only one way you'll ever find out." He held the grin a moment longer, then his eyes peeled skin off Dave's face. "*Ask your question!*"

Murmuring something, Mrs. Howard pushed past her son and stepped down onto the porch, put a hand on the shotgun, and eased it aside.

Without her beret and raincoat she was a squat, shapeless woman with a tired face and a stubborn child's mouth. She waited.

Dave said, "My grandfather never told his friends he had a lockbox. How come he told you?"

Mrs. Howard shrugged. "He just did, when he was showing me that basement, all them packing crates and stuff. I said, just to be talking, 'Boy, I bet you got some real old treasures down here,' and he gave me that dumb old-man's smile and said, 'Naah, got all my treasures in a lockbox.' All there was to it."

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

Dave thanked her and held out the paper sack. Kathy came and took it, retreating quickly to open the sack and peer into it.

On impulse, Dave said, "The old man's checkbook's missing. So's the spare front-door key."

Virg said, "We ain't got 'em." The shotgun swung back into threatening position. "Get lost."

Dave tried to grin. His facial muscles only clenched.

"I just want to know all about how my grandfather died, is all," he said. "Good night."

He turned back to the Tercel. *Slow and easy.* He couldn't let them think they'd chased him off.

He got into the car and drove it up the block to his grandfather's house.

He parked in the driveway and got out and braced himself against the car's roof and trembled like a leaf. Of course they had chased him off. Virg Howard with a gun was pure nightmare. Dave felt impermanent, hanging by a thread.

Rain began falling, and he became aware of the tickle of distant anger. Its unfamiliarity braced him. Pushing away from the car, he

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found he could stand unaided. He slammed and locked the car door. He still hadn't taken in his suitcase but it could wait.

He ran for the porch, let himself in, and snapped on the light as the desk phone began ringing. He snatched it up and barked, "Yes?"

Jan's voice said, "Dave?"

"Oh. Jan. Sorry, didn't mean to yell at you."

"Any luck with the lockbox?"

"No false bottom, no loose flooring. But I just had an adventure. You were right, who needs 'em? I tried to make peace with Mrs. Howard so I could ask her how come my grandfather told her about the box, found myself ogling the business end of a shotgun held by young Virg. Scared me stupid. It turns out the old guy hired Mrs. Howard to clean up his basement, she said something about I bet you got a lot of treasures down here, and he said no, all my treasures are in a lockbox. Sounds offhand enough to be true. She said something else earlier. I told her my grandfather's lawyer hadn't found any lockbox. She said have some tough cop question him, suggesting maybe he lied. And what about Tom Hastings?"

"Who's Tom Hastings?"

"The chess-club member who found my grandfather on the basement steps."

". . . I thought you suspected the Howard kids."

"I think maybe their mom does, too, that's why she's so defensive about them. Or maybe it really was an accident after all. There are still questions I don't think anyone's been asking."

"Go to the police tomorrow and ask them what questions they *did* ask. And . . ."

She paused, then went on in a different, more tentative voice. "Dave, I know this is off the subject, but something's been going through my head. What you told me about Mrs. Howard and your grandfather talking about 'treasures' sort of confirms it. It could mean the box you found *was* the lockbox."

"No treasures in it."

"Redefine treasures."

His patience snapped. "Make your point."

"What did you call what you found in the box?"

"Mementoes? Doesn't mean that's what he kept them for."

"What *did* he keep them for?"

"How the hell should I know? He meant to throw them out but he was old, he forgot."

"Was he old when he kept the oldest of them? What about the photographs you thought were your mother? I never saw a picture of her. Did you even have one?"

Through clenched teeth he said again, "Make your *point!*"

"Maybe we gave your granddad too superficial a reading. He was shy and lonely. He'd lost a wife, a daughter, and who knows what else? Living in his heart hurt too much. So he moved out and lived in his head."

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"So?"

"And he thought the greatest gift he could give his grandson was teach him to do the same."

Dave said, "That it?"

"Yes."

"Why'd he hold onto any mementoes at all?"

"Maybe a few reminders of some good times were a comfort, no matter how infrequently he looked at them, or maybe he scorned himself for the weakness they represented."

He said abruptly, "A lot of maybes. You've been in therapy and learned some of that shamanistic thinking."

"Yes, well, maybe that's true." She became more assertive. "All in the interest of solving your lockbox puzzle, and humanizing your granddad, and explaining why you're such a pain in the ass. Don't take it personally."

"Try explaining the missing front-door key, the missing checkbook."

"You never told me about—"

"I'm telling you now!"

"Do they have anything to do with how he died?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Suddenly he had trouble finding words. A numbing exhaustion had crept up like brigand with bludgeon and caught him by surprise. He'd had a long lousy day. A funeral was a downer even without the depressing convention of deep grief, and the details and questions and conflicting personalities crammed into the rest of the day had improved nothing. This house had improved nothing. The disconnected wires of the furnace remote, the grimy basement windows, the weather, ceiling zero, visibility two blocks, the inexhaustible whispering rain, had all improved nothing, not to mention the missing checkbook and key, and young Virg and his shotgun. . . .

He said awkwardly, "They're just facts that have turned up."

"I understand," Jan said. "I presumed too much, didn't I?"

"Just forget it, okay?"

"I'm sorry, Dave."

"Yeah. Good night."

He hung up.

And damn you, Jan Tarquin.

He had wet string for muscles and water for blood and noticed for the first time how much muddy water he had tracked across the hardwood floor from the front door. He needed a drink. He'd been dumb to give that six-pack to the Howards, it hadn't done any good anyway. Could there be something in the liquor cabinet . . . ? The old man had rarely drunk anything but tea or coffee but had usually kept something around to serve his infrequent guests. . . .

The liquor cabinet, which Dave hadn't raided in his quest for lunch, stood in a corner of the dining room. For an irritating second it resisted opening. A second was enough. Irritation, and the insistent background

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goad of distant anger, focused down to a small point of red light at the base of his brain.

Which, without warning, throbbed briefly and burst.

Revelation.

The old man had been wrong.

Between one heartbeat and the next, the germ of anger that had been drumming its fingers back at the edge of awareness became a raging, sizzling intoxicant scouring his arteries, a drug that vanquished lethargy and cleared vision. He was sharp as a scalpel.

Damn Jan Tarquin. Damn her for being here. For being a victim. For turning her neurotic isolation into a vengeful distortion lens to see him through, for reeling him into her shallow, self-absorbed frame of understanding and reducing him to another mere victim. Another two-bit actor in a narcissistic farce-drama with no aim but a sentimental pig-wallow in false pathos and emotional garbage.

Anger was good. Anger was useful. And don't get in my face, old man, I've listened to you too long.

Anger crested, began an inch-by-inch retreat, leaving him almost panting, fists clenched, his whole body galvanized into combat readiness. Not needed now. No enemies present. He could use that drink not to hide bad feelings but to celebrate new freedom.

This time the liquor cabinet opened without argument. The bottom shelf held a row of glasses on a folded white towel. On the shelf above stood a lone half-full bottle of an Islay Island single-malt scotch whiskey.

He splashed some into one of the glasses and sampled it. He had never tasted a single malt before. This was smoky, smooth, probably intensely celebratory. He took a deep breath and heard rain suddenly loud as a shower of pebbles on the roof.

Damn the rain. Damn the old man for dying in Oregon in November. Okay, and what was the old man's grandson doing here? Trying to appear normally familial to the old man's "friends," all to repay the debt he owed the old man for feeding and clothing him, seeing he got an education. All he really wanted was to get the details seen to so he could leave wet Oregon and the disaster Jan Tarquin had become and all the irritations of his early life behind him. For good.

He had taken the bottle and the glass into the living room. He chose his grandfather's armchair. It looked comfortable. It wasn't. The springs were dead, the whole chair molded to the old man's taller, skinny frame. Hell, the discomfort of the chair was a symbol for the whole dumb situation he'd walked into. He should stay in it and overcome the chair as chair and as symbol and thereby conquer all. If you beat the symbol, didn't you beat what it stood for? Wasn't that what Jan would say?

He poured more of the whiskey. From the coffee table, chessmen studied him with disquietingly blank-eyed stares. The rain hammered down overhead. Where was that goddamn lockbox? Was it possible Jan

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could have guessed right about—No, ridiculous, didn't bear thinking about, all part of her silly campaign to diminish him. . . . Why did she keep coming to his mind at fifteen instead of grown-up and manipulative and bitchy?

He never really knew when his thoughts lost all coherence, merging with troubled dreams of puzzlement and loss, and then suddenly he started awake, cramped and uncomfortable in his grandfather's chair, to discover that it was almost one o'clock, that he had drunk at least half the whiskey, and had to talk to Jan.

Getting out of the chair hurt. So did standing straight. The small of his back felt run over by a tractor and he had forgotten what his knees were for. The captive glowworm in the light fixture overhead poked angry fingers into his eyes.

He stumbled across the room to the desk phone. He had written her number on the cover of the directory. He dialed it clumsily. She took a long time to answer.

At last she said sleepily, "Hello?"

He'd been going to ask something about Mrs. Howard but suddenly wasn't sure just what. He surprised himself by saying instead, "Does it really matter?"

He listened to her breathing, gathering her wits.

He explained impatiently, "Whether my grandfather was or was not the unfeeling old bastard he always seemed."

"Oh. Dave. What time is it?"

"Twelve fifty-eight."

"Oh." Her voice was faint but behind it connections to the real world were being made. "No, I guess not. It might make a difference to how you think of him. What makes this so important at twelve fifty-eight?"

". . . Nothing, I guess. Listen. Right after we talked before, something weird happened. I got mad. Real red fury, first time in my life. I thought I was mad at you, now I'm not so sure. I poured me a little drink and swallowed the whole distillery. Fell asleep in a merciless armchair, woke up with a broken back. I think someone's been tramping through my head replugging half the wiring. Nothing makes much sense."

"Well, I'm glad you're not mad at me. Who're you mad at? Your granddad?"

"Why bother?"

"Your getting mad is quite a breakthrough. Getting mad at him would be a bigger one. You've been mad at him most of your life. Isn't that why you worked so hard to be like him, beat him at his own game, replace him?"

"You've been reading tea leaves again."

"If you're finally getting mad at your grandfather, maybe it's because you've started seeing him as a failure at loving instead of a success at tyranny."

"Why're you so hung up on my grandfather?"

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"I didn't make this call, the agenda's yours, you brought him up. If there's something else can it please wait till I put Barbara on the school bus at ten past eight?"

". . . I guess so."

"I'll bet what we did talk about was more important. Good night."

The disconnection came a heartbeat after the last word. She didn't want any smart replies. Or any thoughtful or analytic ones. Not that he could think of any. Maybe he was still half drunk or hungover.

The nearest bed was in his grandfather's room.

This time the dreams were goading, thwarting. They played against a dim roaring background that touched everything with the anxiety of developing nightmare.

His grandfather was alive and wouldn't say where his checkbook was and knew all about Dave and Jan in the basement and in a voice like setting ice warned against the flow of hormones and emotions, regretting his failure to instill in David a due appreciation of the joys of intellection until Dave burst out, feeling insignificant against the grandeur of the Heavens and the old man's glacial certainty, "God damn it, I'm thirty-one and I'll screw whom I like," and naked teenage Jan was recoiling from him like grown-up Jan, eyes huge and dark in a pale pointy face and his grandfather, all thoughtful calm, was trying to throttle him with a hand that felt like a bundle of dry twigs but was amazingly strong—

He struggled to sit up, coughing. His eyes stung. Through smoke that filled the room he saw a lurid red line under the bedroom door. He smelled gasoline.

He had slept in his clothes under a heavy quilt. He kicked free of it, stepped into his shoes, and blundered to the door. It was too hot to touch. The light switch didn't work. His mind skipped around like water on a hot skillet, the rest of him beginning to fumble along after it in the hope of guidance. *It's called panic, son. Don't think. Just get your ass out of here.*

He felt his way along the footboard of the bed to the window. The chest of drawers blocked his way. He hooked both hands around its rear edge and hauled. It scraped across the floor like a rusty gate until it hit the bed—but had given him access to the window. He tripped the shade. It rattled up. He grabbed the sash lock but couldn't move it.

Beginning to cough in earnest, he pulled a narrow top drawer from the chest of drawers and drove it through the window. Broken glass flew and cold air hit him in the face and the drawer stuck halfway through the flyscreen. He sawed it violently in and out, glass flying, until the screen gave way and the drawer fell to the ground. Someone outside was shrieking something but he had no time to listen. Something to get—no!—*two* things.

He got his quilted jacket from the bedside chair, put it on, and zipped it up against self-inflicted abdominal surgery when he shoved himself

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through the window. Then he felt for the walk-in closet door and opened it. Fire was already eating through the wall from the middle of the house. He scooped up the luckless gray lockbox and carried it to the window and threw it out. Then, ignoring the remaining spikes of glass still in the frame, he reached beyond the window to the sill and hauled himself through the opening.

A three-point landing—hands and forehead hitting the cement walk at the same time—knocked him silly. He was vaguely aware of struggling to get up until someone turned him over on his back, grabbed his wrists, and dragged him away from the house. The godawful roaring, grinding noise was the first fire truck arriving.

The cops questioned Jan first, and then the paramedics gave her a blanket to wrap around her dressing gown and told her to go home and get into a hot bath. She tucked Dave's gray wooden box under the blanket and left. With Dave the paramedics were brisk and professionally sympathetic and stuck a big Band-Aid at an angle above one eye. The cops were noncommittal and very interested in how much drinking he'd done and when. His head had begun aching badly by the time they let him go. The firemen were still busy.

Dave crossed the street to the Tarquin house—the *Ford* house. The front door was locked, of course: Her kid was there and paranoid habits were compulsive. He knocked briefly. She opened the door at once. She had cranked up the heat but was still wrapped in the blanket. Her shadowed eyes looked bruised. He smelled coffee.

"You don't have to invite me in," Dave said, "I can—"

Her response was sharp, impatient, with a tendency to stutter.

"Oh, for Christ's s-sake, don't g-give me that crap, you're as cold as I am. There's coffee. Warm up while I soak in the tub."

He followed her into the kitchen. She stopped suddenly, irresolutely, in the middle of the floor, eyes focused somewhere else. She hugged the blanket tightly about her. A red dressing gown and two pajama-pants legs poked out below it, and feet in wet muddy bedroom slippers.

She waved vaguely at the breakfast nook. The coffee pot and cups and saucers and the brandy bottle waited on the table. The gray box sat on one of the chairs.

"When I came squirting out of that window and landed on my head," Dave said, "you didn't waste any time dragging me away from the house. Pretty good, for someone who hates touching and being touched."

"Yes. Well." A small intake of breath, something between a sigh and a sob. "It just . . . happened." She looked down at her toes.

Dave said, "I owe you a new pair of slippers."

A small shrug under the blanket. Then she kicked off the muddy slippers and walked barefoot out of the kitchen and disappeared up the stairs.

He wasn't sure what she had to be emotional about, but he was grate-

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ful to her. Unable to get back to sleep after his one o'clock phone call, she had got up and brewed some herbal tea and read for a while, and then, wondering about some half-heard sound, had looked out her front window and seen the fire. She had called 911 and grabbed her house keys and run across the street. Unable to break in, she had stood yelling for him to get up and get out. When he did get out, she had hauled him to greater safety. He couldn't have asked more of anyone.

But it was he who should be emotional, if he were given to it. Well, he wasn't. The house was just a place he had once known, full of things the old man must have valued, not he. That someone had tried to kill him was different. He was quite prepared to get emotional about that—full of controlled cold anger at the right time.

He poured himself a cup of coffee, ignoring the brandy; it might make him sleepy. The paramedics had told him to stay awake for at least a couple of hours.

When Jan came back downstairs, in jeans and boots and a heavy turtleneck sweater the color of oatmeal, he was finishing his second cup of coffee and going through the contents of the box again.

Dave asked, "How's the little girl?"

"Oh, fine. She slept through everything." Jan moved like someone dreaming, and spoke as though nothing mattered much. "Everything stay dry in there?"

"Yes—luckily, since the box was pretty shaky even before I threw it out the window."

"Ready to admit it's the mysterious lockbox?"

He shook his head, turned to the window as a car or van started up somewhere outside. He moved the curtain aside, swiped fingers across the moisture-frosted glass.

She said behind him, "I thought you might have changed your mind, since you brought *that* box out with you. . . ."

"That's the ambulance just left," Dave said. "There's a light on at the Howards'."

He let the curtain fall back into place. She poured the last of the coffee into her cup.

"I wish I'd seen something useful, when I first saw the fire." She still didn't sound really interested. "You know, someone running away, someone recognizable."

Dave said slowly, "You suppose Virg and Kathy are on their way to see if I got barbequed?"

He stood up. She blinked, shrugged, took a deep slow breath and released it.

"Trying to prove how tough you are? What do you think you can do?"

He admitted he had no idea. She dug a key ring out of her pocket and slid it across the table.

"Lock the front door after yourself. And don't do anything dumb."

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Night air went up his nose like ice daggers. Light from the fire equipment made the street gleam wetly.

His grandfather's house was a blackened shell. Smoke and steam crawled out of broken windows and burned-through patches of wall. Firemen in helmets and waterproof gear dealt with hidden sparks and hot spots.

The squad car was parked behind the fire trucks. The two uniformed cops stood on the sidewalk, watching the firemen. There wasn't much else to watch. It was too early and too cold for a crowd to have gathered.

Dave took a long look at the ruin of the house. Unexpectedly his own voice in his mind said, *Sorry, Grandfather. At least I got your lockbox out*, and he felt a disorienting lurch as the implications staggered him. He was suddenly sharply nauseated. He clamped his eyes shut. Behind his eyelids parallel lines converged and crossed, parameters and paradigms melted and merged. He was adrift in a swirling current. If the old guy had been just a shy recluse, then his guidelines were only the demarcations of a prison, not principles to live by.

He opened his eyes. The cops were turning to look at him. God damn. He *couldn't* throw up. *Breathe slow. Relax.*

Nausea retreated, though the sense of disorientation still rocked him and his head ached. *Okay. Tonight's challenge: Act natural.*

He shoved his hands into his pockets, aimed for an easy tone. "Any sign of arson yet?"

They were older than the cops this morning. Sundahl was big and gray; Crossen was thin, dark, with a face like a hatchet. They had annoyed him before, being calm and meticulously polite. Now they managed to look disinterested and watchful at the same time.

"Mr. North." Sundahl gave him a nod. "The firemen reported smelling gasoline, same as you."

Officer Crossen smiled guardedly. "Nothing to justify arresting the Howard kids, though."

"What kind of evidence survives a fire like this one?"

"Sometimes you'd be surprised," Sundahl said. "Was there something in particular?"

"Just curious about the house I grew up in, and I have to get my suitcase from the car."

"What's in the suitcase, sir?" Sundahl asked too casually, without rising inflection.

"Nothing to justify your thinking I set the fire myself. Just clothes, toilet articles. Want to look?"

Sundahl looked at him stonily. "That won't be necessary, sir."

"Do I annoy you, Officer?"

A muscle in Sundahl's jaw twitched once.

"You couldn't annoy me if you tried."

"What, no 'sir' this time around?"

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A door closed down the street. Dave looked, saw Virg Howard shambling across the porch of the old MacDonald house.

Dave said to Crossen, "Go ask young Virg why he isn't curled up in bed with his sister."

"No call to do that, *sir*."

Virg was approaching. Dave's headache throbbed. He started down to meet Virg.

Crossen said quietly, "Stay cool, Mr. North."

Virg, in his flaps-down lumberjack's hat and ratty coat and jeans, had his eyes on the ruin of the house. His mouth hung partway open.

Dave said, "Hi, Virg."

Virg stopped. He refocused on Dave.

". . . Uh. Hi. You got out okay, huh?"

"Oh sure. Disappointed?"

"Disa—?" He looked bewildered. "Huh?"

Dave said, "You tried to scare me with that shotgun earlier. Think you could do it better with a match and a can of gasoline?"

"Jesus, man. The shotgun was a gag. Weren't no shells in it. All day you been trying to pin something on me and my sis and we ain't done *nothin'*–"

"Not me. Maybe your mom's been trying to pin something on you." It was the idea he'd wanted to try out on Jan at one o'clock. "Always jumping to your defense, even when no one's accused you, like maybe she's trying to make people think she's protesting too much . . ."

Virg's head was shaking violently. "No . . . no. Why'd she do that?"

"She's tired of having you around to take care of." Virg's head went on shaking. "Or maybe she suspects you, or, even worse, *knows* you did it."

"Did *what*, for Chrissakes?"

"Threw the old man down the stairs. Set fire to my house."

Virg's head stopped shaking. He stood bent over, like someone who's had the wind knocked out of him, a gangling kid out of his depth, shocked beyond imagining.

Officer Crossen said behind Dave, "Any suspicions you have, Mr. North, better take 'em to the police department in the morning."

"But I ain't done nothin'," Virg protested in a little kid's voice.

The sound down the block was a stuck window being forced open.

A girl's voice called, "Hey, Virg! Who you talkin' to? Mom wants you back inside."

"I ain't done *nothin'*," Virg said again.

"Mom's calling," Dave said. "Let's go talk to her."

Virg summoned a spark of pale venom.

"What makes you think she'll talk to you?"

"Tell her I found the lockbox," Dave said.

When they were halfway down the block a recent-model car came around the corner and went by in the opposite direction. Virg broke into

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an ungainly run. He reached his home, blundered up onto the porch, and disappeared inside.

Dave blew on his hands, crammed them back into his pockets. Behind him Officer Crossen said, "Playing kinda rough, aren't you?"

"You're letting me."

"That bit about the shotgun needed some follow-up. You really think he's guilty?"

"Look," Dave said, "I had a lousy day and then it got worse and I've got this headache. Don't know what I think from minute to minute." The wiring in his head was still being replugged. Unfamiliar thoughts were trying to find form and coherence.

Kathy appeared in the upstairs window.

"Where'd you find it?" she asked eagerly.

"Downstairs bedroom closet," Dave said.

"Good stuff in it?"

The front door opened. Mrs. Howard marched out in her raincoat and a heavy muffler. She left the porch and came to the sidewalk and looked back up at Kathy.

"I told you, don't talk to nobody. Close the window. Go back to bed."

Kathy closed the window with difficulty. The light in the room went out, leaving Mrs. Howard's face almost invisible when she turned on Dave.

"I told you, stop spreading lies about my kids."

"I've been learning about how much evidence can survive a fire like that one," Dave said.

"You won't find any evidence against my kids!"

"There never was much of an investigation when the old man died," Dave said. "No reason there should be. Old people have accidents all the time. But you heard me say I wanted to find out just how it happened. You know they're not guilty but you thought I might make trouble for Virg and Kathy, so tonight you tried to burn down the house—with me in it."

"What're you talking about, mister?"

"You went a bit far over my grandfather's lockbox. What did you think you'd find in it, something that'd bring you a little cash, enough for something for the kids, who've never really had anything? After a lifetime of honesty, you'd bend the rules a bit and the old guy would never know, where's the harm, right? The afternoon you worked for him you couldn't find the lockbox, but you found and swiped the spare front-door key—"

"I never swiped nothing. Do I have to listen to this crap, Officer?"

"No, ma'am." Crossen said.

"*I* found the lockbox," Dave said. "Only things in it were *family* treasures—old pictures, old memories, stuff like that. Not worth a dime to anyone else."

He wished he could see her face.

She said, ". . . So?"

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"So you killed him for nothing."

He heard her intake of breath. It began raining again, gently, traight down, freezing. She turned abruptly and stumbled back onto ıe porch and through the front door.

"Evidence?" Officer Crossen said patiently.

Dave shook his head. His headache had almost gone and he felt numb ·ith astonishment that he'd thought and said any of that. No anger, ıough. Just a sense of futility.

"Evidence is cop's work. And it's surprising how much evidence sur- ives a fire."

"Sometimes. Proving she set the fire don't prove she murdered anyone."

"It'd be a start," Dave said. "Actually, I don't think she meant to. A ·eek after she stole the key—last Wednesday—she let herself into the ouse to look for that lockbox again. The old man came home early. Iaybe she tried to get away unrecognized but wound up shoving him own the basement steps. She thought she'd killed him. He may have ecognized her anyway, since he connected his attacker with the lock- ox and tried to explain, or else in the end the box and everything in it ·ere all that mattered. Anyway, she went down past him to the fur- ace. If it was on, she shut it off. Then she pulled a few wires loose from ıe remote connection. It was a cold rainy evening. A nonworking fur- ace would explain what he was doing on the stairs—going down to ght it manually. Then—and this is pure guesswork—she remem- ered seeing his checkbook in the desk where she'd found the key. She ıok that too because it had her name in the register as a recent payee nd she didn't want anyone knowing she'd ever been in the house. If ıe'd been really smart she'd have returned the key, but then wouldn't ave had it to let herself in tonight.

"Anyway, she heard Tom Hastings at the front door, trying to return ıe old guy's notebook, so she ducked out the back. Old-fashioned lock, ɔ automatic latch, so she couldn't lock it. Hastings found it unlocked ıd went in. Mrs. Howard walked home through the rain and waited ır her kids to get home from the movies."

Crossen sighed.

"Yeah," he admitted. "And maybe no. Evidence, Mr. North. You aven't said anything to convince me, much less a judge and jury."

"But if she loads the kids into that old Ford and splits, it could start you ıys thinking, especially if she runs out on light or gas bills, things like ıat. And who knows what the arson investigation is going to turn up."

Crossen's throat made an unhopeful noise.

"Well, anyway," Dave said. "I'm cold and wet and to hell with it. Good ght, if it's still night."

e turned up the block. The firemen were packing their equipment. he house was surrounded by a crime-scene tape.

Well, Grandfather, at least it's a down payment on that debt. Or will :, if the cops find anything.

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The car he'd seen going up the block was parked in the driveway c number 1614. He crossed the street. He had the house key in his pocke but using it might seem presumptuous.

He knocked. He knew before it opened who would open it.

At least he wasn't a giant Viking. A bit taller then Dave, lean, dark with rimless glasses.

"I'll bet you're Dave."

"That's me."

"Hi, I'm Jeff Ford." He stuck out a hand. He had a good handshak that didn't have to prove it could crush granite. Dave stepped throug the door into dry warmth as Jan came out of the kitchen. Jeff For closed the door.

Jan said, "My God, you look drowned. I made another pot of coffe and the heater's on in the bathroom so it's nice and warm. I left som dry clothes there for you to try on."

A gesture invited him into the kitchen. He dug the key ring out of hi pocket and laid it on the shelf under the mirror in the coatrack. H went past her into the kitchen and they followed him, Jan lacing he fingers through her husband's and hanging on as though his arm wer a lifeline.

Dave met her eyes, which were carefully blank. He smiled to hide stab of disappointment that almost floored him.

He heard himself say, "I've been enough of a nuisance for one day, just came to pick up the lockbox. Yes, you were right about that"—h pointed to the gray box on the dinette chair—"but the idea took som getting used to. I'll go find a motel."

"We've got a spare room," Jeff Ford said reasonably.

"Hell, I couldn't impose. I have to get a few hours' sleep and then go tal to the cops. I've got a suspect for them. Murder and arson. Mrs. Howard."

Jeff Ford said, "Rosie *Howard?* Why on earth—?"

"I know, she's honest and reliable. I guess too many years of workin your buns off for two desperately ordinary kids and getting nowher gets you to the point where you're ready to trade a lot of that goo karma for a little something nice. She thought she'd find it in the lock box. Unfortunately, my grandfather came home early. Tonight she trie to turn me into a crispy critter because I'd said I wanted to find out a about the old guy's death and she was afraid I was going to accuse Vir and Kathy."

Jeff Ford said, "Can you prove any of this?"

"None of it. I'm hoping the cops'll be able to. Or that Mrs. Howar does something to give herself away." Dave dredged up a painful grin pointed to where Jan was hanging onto her husband. "You're going t cut off the circulation in that poor man's arm. If you can let go lon enough to lend me a plastic trash sack I can carry my treasure bo in . . ."

"Oh. Sure."

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She let go of Jeff's arm and found Dave what he needed in a kitchen drawer.

Jeff asked, "Any chance you'll move back into the neighborhood?"

"No chance at all." *Be too hard. I think I've been in love with your wife since I was fifteen and never knew it.* "I can't take the weather."

Jan held the plastic sack open while he slid the lockbox into it.

"I'm sorry about your house, Dave."

"Thank you. Yeah. Me too." And all the chessmen and the music and the memories, even the bad ones. He headed for the front door.

Jeff Ford opened it for him. It was still raining. The trucks were gone, but there were now two cop cars in front of his grandfather's house. They weren't wasting any time.

Jan said, "Let us know where you're staying."

"Call you first thing."

"Drive carefully. Good night."

The door closed behind him. He felt terribly alone. He didn't feel like a ghost, or like someone who'd come comfortably home, but like someone who finds himself in an inexplicably alien country.

For a few moments he stood and watched the rain and breathed the smell of wet charcoal coming from what was left of his grandfather's house.

Yesterday he wouldn't have been able to care less.

Maybe he was going to get nostalgic about yesterday. Or was that just his grandfather being disapproving?

Knock it off, Grandfather.

He stepped out into the rain and crossed the street toward his car. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

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BY BARBARA D'AMATO

My Shopping Day
BY IAN RANKIN

Generational Conflicts
BY STEPHEN WASYLYK

Remembering Kazarian
BY MARJORIE ECCLES

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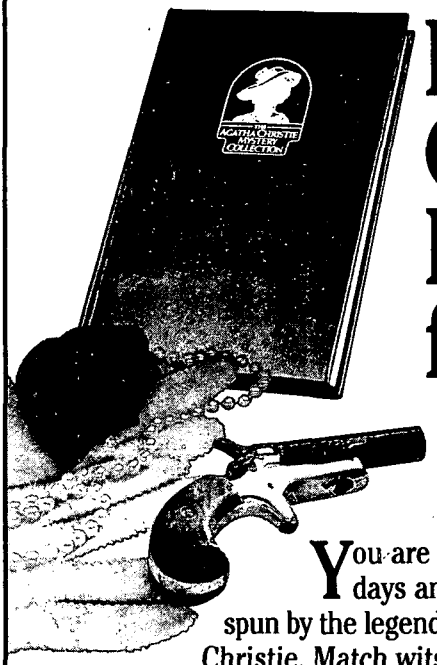

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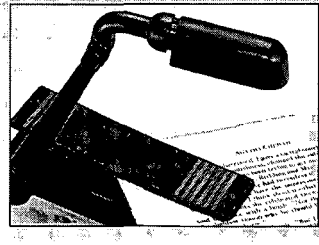

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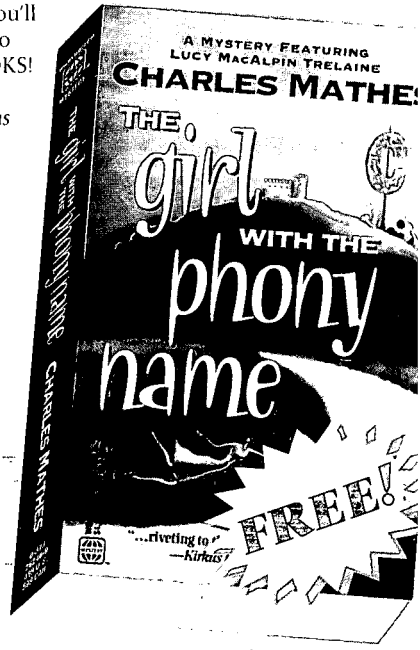

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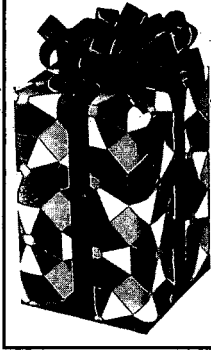

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